



AVATAR

THE LAST AIRBENDER



THE RECKONING OF ROKU

RANDY RIBAY

CHRONICLES OF THE AVATAR



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Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for and may be obtained from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4197-7603-8
eISBN 979-8-88707-382-8

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Cover illustrations by Velinxi
Book design by Micah Fleming

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PROLOGUE

Sozin hated parties, and this one was no exception. As the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation, he knew how to keep up appearances and pretend to be having a good time—but he found it harder than usual to hold the smile on his face or conceal the falseness behind his forced laughter as he mingled with the social climbers and sycophants crawling all over the Royal Palace gardens for tonight's festivities.

After all, what was there to celebrate? Sure, the Fire Nation had its first Avatar in centuries, but all that meant to Sozin in this moment was that his closest friend was leaving in the morning.

He extracted himself from his current conversation with the thinnest of excuses and walked away, passing under the red paper lanterns as he strolled through the crowded gardens, dodging conversations and returning greetings with the barest of nods. His parents, Fire Lord Taiso and Lady Hazei, were seated at the head table holding court. His sister, Princess Zeisan, stood at the edge of the turtle-duck pond deep in conversation with her science tutor, a slender brown-skinned Ember Island native whose rope dart was rumored to be as sharp as her mind.

Sozin swiped a cup of blazing plum wine from a passing server's tray, took a swig, and stifled a cough as it burned his throat on the way down. He abandoned the remainder of the drink atop the head of a lion-turtle statue, then headed in the opposite direction of his family. He wandered through the sculpture garden and then the hedge maze before finally spotting Roku under the ancient mountain ginkgo tree that stood in the middle of the eastern courtyard. The head of a minor clan had cornered the new Avatar and was trying to introduce him to his daughter, an annoyed-looking girl who couldn't have been more than eleven or twelve. Roku—who had not yet learned to mask his true emotions—clearly didn't want to be there either, but he was too polite and too passive to extricate himself. Sozin would have to save him.

“Excuse me,” Sozin interrupted. “I must steal Avatar Roku for a moment. Fire Lord Taiso requires his attention.”

“Of course, my Prince,” the man said, bowing deeply as relief washed over his daughter’s face.

“It was a pleasure to meet you both,” Roku said, then followed Sozin away. “Any idea what your father wants?”

Sozin sighed. His friend had always been too trusting. It was a fault Sozin had always found endearing but now feared could put Roku in danger someday given his newly elevated status.

“Oh . . .” Roku said, coming to a slow realization, “the Fire Lord doesn’t want to see me.”

Sozin rolled his eyes. “The fireworks are about to start.”

He led Roku away from the festivities, past the Royal Guards, and into the blissfully empty palace. Their footsteps echoed through the halls as they made their way to the top level of the southern tower. They climbed out onto the roof as the first fireworks began to burst over the caldera.

As they watched the explosions of color without speaking, Sozin’s mind turned to his father’s private reaction after the Fire Sages announced Roku was the Avatar.

“I’m disappointed it’s not you, but I’m not surprised,” Fire Lord Taiso had told Sozin, who hid the hurt well. “However, you may still be of great use to our nation. Tend to your friendship like a fire, then learn to bend it to your will.”

The suggestion—or was it a command?—hadn’t sat well with Sozin. Roku was his only true remaining friend, and true friends didn’t manipulate one another. But he didn’t dare say as much to his father. Instead, Sozin simply nodded and walked away when dismissed, the words sticking in his mind like a prickly burr sticks inside one’s robes.

A particularly loud boom pulled Sozin back to the present. Scatters of red light fell, and in the space before the next firework burst, he finally spoke. “I know you’re too scared to speak to Ta Min, but that girl you were talking to by the ginkgo tree looked a little young for you.”

Roku laughed. “Shut up.”

“I don’t know why you’re still nervous. If you ever had a chance with Ta Min, tonight is it. Truly unbelievable the way every eligible Fire National has been fawning over you since the announcement.”

“I’m leaving tomorrow.” Roku’s shoulders sagged. “What’s the point?”

“You’re probably right,” Sozin said, then elbowed Roku in the ribs. “Avatar or not, you’re still so ugly, Koh wouldn’t take that face even if you tried giving it to him for free.”

Roku pushed Sozin’s elbow away. “And it would be a shame if *your* pretty face fell off this roof.”

“How would murdering the Crown Prince reflect on the new Avatar?”

Roku shrugged. “I’ll simply tell everyone I had to maintain balance by knocking *you* off balance.”

“As if you could.”

Roku stood and made a show of rolling up his sleeves and unbuttoning his collar. Grinning, Sozin climbed to his feet and made his way to the opposite end of the roof. They bowed at each other, then took up their fighting stances as if squaring off for an Agni Kai.

Snatches of music and conversation floated up from the city below, punctuated by the occasional burst of laughter. A firework whistled upward through the darkness, then boomed into a bloom of golden lights that flickered and crackled as they fell. Neither looked.

Sozin struck first with a half-hearted fire fist that Roku brushed aside with an arcing kick. But when Roku’s foot came back down, he slipped and started to slide down the roof.

Sozin caught Roku by the arm as their sudden movements pushed several ceramic roof tiles over the eaves. The tiles fell silently through the darkness for several seconds before shattering as they struck the ground far below. The possibility that that could have been Roku flickered across both their minds before Sozin pulled Roku up and they fell onto their backs laughing.

The laughter passed. They caught their breath. Silence settled between them.

Roku sighed. “I never thought it would be me. Sure, we all knew it was going to be someone from our year and our nation. But still. It’s not like anyone *actually* thinks it’s going to be them, right?”

Sozin didn’t say anything.

“Maybe I should have told the Fire Sages, ‘No, thanks.’”

“I’m sure that would have gone over well.” Sozin leaned back on his hands.

Roku let out a sad chuckle.

“You’re going to get to see the world, *Avatar* Roku.”

Roku pulled his legs up and hugged his knees to his chest. “I’d rather stay here.”

“Think of all the abilities you’re going to master.”

“My life was supposed to get easier after we graduated from the Academy.”

“Think of all the experiences you’re going to have,” Sozin countered.

“You mean all the battles I’m going to have to fight?”

“You’re going to be rubbing shoulders with all the world leaders.”

Roku leaned over and flicked the golden headpiece that encircled Sozin’s topknot. “I don’t need to go anywhere to do that, Prince Sozin.”

Sozin swatted Roku’s hand away. “You’re literally going to be the most powerful person on the planet. Everything you do will be written in history.”

“Is it so bad to crave a simple life?”

“It is when you’re destined for greatness.”

Roku scoffed. “I don’t care about greatness.”

Sozin knew this to be true. Roku’s lack of ambition was the main reason Sozin could let his guard down around Roku in a way he couldn’t with any of their other classmates. Still, Sozin found himself suppressing his growing frustration at his friend’s lack of gratitude. “At least you’ll get away from your parents,” he offered.

Roku sighed once more. The next time he spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper. “Sozin, what if . . . I can’t do it?”

“What do you mean?”

Roku started to speak, stopped himself, then muttered, “Nothing. Never mind.”

“You’ll be great,” Sozin said after one beat too many. “If this is because of your brother—”

“It’s not.”

“If you say so.”

Roku shifted slightly so he was facing Sozin. “It’s just . . . how do *you* do it?”

“Do what?” Sozin asked, still watching the fireworks.

“Not suffocate under the weight of everyone’s expectations? Doesn’t the thought of having so much responsibility and so many people depending on you ever scare you? I already feel like I can’t breathe, and I’ve only just found out who I am. But you’ve known who you are your entire life, and you seem fine.”

Sozin considered the question. With anyone else, he’d crack some joke about how it was easy since he was so amazing. Instead, he cast about in his mind for an honest response. As close as they were, they’d never spoken about how Sozin *felt* about his destiny because, until now, Roku had never had a real reason to wonder.

“Who said I’m not scared?” Sozin finally responded.

“So you are?”

Sozin laughed. “All the time.”

“How do you deal with it?”

“Pretend I’m not. You should learn to do the same.”

“And that works?”

“If my closest friend in the world couldn’t tell, then it appears so.”

The fireworks began to fire off rapidly, interrupting their conversation. One burst atop another atop another atop another, the night sky an ephemeral bouquet of exploding colors. Roku and Sozin watched wordlessly, their faces lit by the flashes of light, their ears ringing with the rapid crack-boom-sizzle of the detonations. When the finale reached its peak, a massive dragon formed out of fire swept over the city, then dissipated into the air as it climbed toward the quarter moon. There was a moment of hushed awe, and then the capital’s streets erupted in applause and cheers for the talented team of Firebenders behind the show.

Gradually, the clapping died down and the conversations and music and laughter resumed. But at Roku and Sozin’s level, there was only the thick, gray smoke from the fireworks that hung in the air, obscuring the stars and carrying the scent of gunpowder.

“We should get back,” Roku said after a few minutes, “before your father executes the panicked servants he probably tasked to find us.”

“If only that were a joke.” Sozin stood and pulled Roku to his feet. “I’ll let you pack, then I’ll stop by your room to say a proper goodbye. Spirits know we won’t get the chance in the morning during the spectacle of the Avatar’s official departure.”

“Of course, my Prince.” Roku bowed exaggeratedly, nearly slipping to his death again.

They climbed back inside, and Sozin draped an arm over Roku’s shoulders and walked his friend out of the palace for what might be the last time.



The next morning, everyone gathered in the palace courtyard to witness the historic moment when the first Fire Avatar since Avatar Szeto departed to begin his training. Sozin stood up front with the rest of the royal family, Roku and his parents, and the petite Air Nun with the shaved head who was now Roku’s air-bending master. Behind them stood the Fire Sages, the generals, and the heads of the most prominent clans. Commoners and pilgrims filled out the rest of the courtyard, spilling through the gates. The palace loomed over the entire scene as the sun rose into a clear sky.

Sozin waited as Roku moved down the line in order of ascending political importance. To most, the new Avatar probably seemed calm and composed—and maybe even a bit arrogant—as he received then returned each bow.

But Sozin saw through his friend’s smirking strut. Roku was only trying to follow Sozin’s advice to act how he wanted to be perceived. Roku wasn’t confident—he was afraid.

Sozin continued watching as Roku said goodbye to the Fire Sages, the nation’s highest-ranking officials, and his own parents. As he reached the royal family and bid farewell to Princess Zeisan, Sozin forced his smile to widen and prepared his parting joke about how Roku’s head was going to look like a pale, misshapen cabbage after the Air Nomads shaved his hair.

But when Roku stepped in front of him and their eyes met, Sozin froze. The reality hit.

His friend was leaving. His only true friend.

The immense responsibilities that lay waiting in the wings of both their futures would certainly pull them in all sorts of directions. How long would pass before they saw each other again? Under what circumstances? Maybe they’d drift apart. Maybe they’d change. Perhaps so much so that the next time they met, they’d barely recognize each other.

Maybe Sozin would never have another friend like Roku ever again.

Fire Lord Taiso cleared his throat, snapping Sozin out of his reverie.

Sozin blinked, then bowed. Smiling sadly, Roku returned the gesture, then moved on to Fire Lady Hazei. When Roku reached Fire Lord Taiso, it was the new Avatar who bent forward first—and Sozin noticed a flash of annoyance pass across the face of Roku's new airbending master.

After Sozin's father gave one of his long-winded speeches, Roku followed the Airbender to her sky bison at the edge of the courtyard. Before climbing upon its saddle, Roku turned around one last time. His gaze landed on Sozin, then he tapped the golden, dual-pronged headpiece that now sat atop his head instead of Sozin's. It was—or had been—the Prince's Crown, passed down through the royal family and worn by every heir to the throne until Sozin had gifted it to Roku when they had said their real goodbye last night.

Giving the artifact to Roku had been Fire Lord Taiso's idea. "A tangible reminder of where his true loyalties should lie," Fire Lord Taiso had told Sozin. "A leash, if you will."

Sozin felt a pang of guilt, but when he returned Roku's gesture with a small nod, he told himself he had given it to Roku because it felt right to do so and not out of some intention to manipulate.

Roku turned back around and mounted the sky bison.

"Yip yip," the Air Nun commanded, and the massive beast beat its wide tail and took flight, sending out a gust of wind that pushed back those who'd gathered too close.

Sozin watched the sky bison carry Roku and the Air Nun farther and farther away, higher and higher up. Their figures shrank until they became nothing but a speck in the sky that soon disappeared into the clouds.

His friend was gone.

Off to the Southern Air Temple, off to master airbending, off to become the Avatar.

Sozin excused himself and pushed his way through the crowd. He ducked into the palace, jogged down its long hallways, skirted under the judgmental portraits of his predecessors, and slipped into his chambers. He slid the door shut, sat down, and dropped his face into his hands. His position demanded that he never publicly show a trace of weakness, but now that he was alone, he let his mask crumble.

His friend was gone.

And his heart burned like wildfire.

Sozin would never be literally alone if he didn't want to be. He'd only have to snap his fingers if he desired a Pai Sho opponent or a training partner or a dining companion. But he'd learned early on that everyone—except for Roku—wanted something from him. They were leeches, always creeping as close to power as possible.

Sozin clenched flaring fists and slammed them down on either side of his legs, scorching the floor.

His friend was gone. The sole person in this world with whom he could be completely honest.

Now, he was alone.

Curse the Fire Sages who spoke the unwelcome announcement.

Curse the Air Nomads for requiring Roku to move to their temple.

Curse a world that provided such friends only to snatch them away.

The more Sozin thought about what he'd lost, the more Roku's rooftop words from last night rang through his mind. The more his sorrow began to simmer.

Roku was right—it should not have been him.

A SPIRIT OF NO NATION

THREE MONTHS LATER

Roku laced the layer of dried nipa fronds into place to complete the roof, then sat up to survey his work from atop the hut. He was no builder—in fact, his parents had made sure their sons never performed any manual labor—but it looked decent enough. At the very least, it had walls and a roof, whereas it had been a pile of shattered and splintered wood like nearly every structure in the seaside fishing village when he and the Air Nomads arrived almost two weeks ago, in the wake of one of the most powerful typhoons that had swept over the southwestern Earth Kingdom coast in recent memory.

They had all gone silent that day as their sky bison descended through the clouds. The village had been the picture of destruction. Not a single structure remained standing. Debris littered the bay and the crescent-shaped beach. Jagged tree trunks jutted out of the ground like broken spears, while others had been uprooted and strewn across land and sea. The small harbor was destroyed, the boats sunken by the storm—and with them, the villagers' livelihood. It was as if some vengeful spirit had dragged a mountainous arm across the coastline.

The Air Nomads and the new Avatar had come to help, sky bison saddles loaded with as much food, clean water, medicine, and other supplies as the great beasts could carry. Roku had spent the summer accompanying them on one such humanitarian trip after another, but hopelessness had still overcome Roku when he had taken in the scale of devastation and the work that lay ahead.

“Why don't they just move elsewhere?” he'd asked his air-bending master, a short and slight older woman named Sister Disha who kept her tattooed head completely bald instead of only shaving the front half like most other Air Nuns Roku had seen.

Sister Disha answered patiently as she guided her sky bison, Amra, toward a clearing outside the village. “This is a poor village, Avatar Roku.

Many of the younger generation have already left to find work in Gaoling or Omashu or the other cities, and those who remain do not have the means to start again elsewhere. Even if they did, I doubt they would.”

“Why is that?”

“This is their home.”

That, for once, was something Roku understood better than any Air Nomad. “So what will happen when the older generation passes?”

“I suspect so too will the village,” Sister Disha said evenly. Catching Roku’s look of dissatisfaction, she added, “Everything in this world is temporary.”

And so, the villagers—with the help of the Air Nomads and their sky bison—had gotten to work. From sunrise to sunset through the late-summer heat, they had worked together to clean, clear, carry, bury, repair, replant, rebuild. And what might have taken the villagers months if working by themselves took only a couple of weeks. There was still more to do, but now that the bulk of the reconstruction was complete and the season was ending, the Air Nomads would return to the Southern Air Temple.

“Looks good,” Sister Disha said as she floated up to the roof to examine the final portion of work Roku had just completed, hands clasped behind her back. “I’m sure this family will be happy to move out of their tent.”

“I would’ve had time to make many more families happy if you’d taught me any airbending yet,” Roku said, then nodded across the way where a young Air Nomad used her airbending to blow a dozen palm fronds perfectly into place in a matter of seconds.

Sister Disha drifted back to the ground. “In order to fly, one must first learn to let go of the ground.”

Roku sighed and climbed down the bamboo ladder. He wiped the sweat from his brow with the hem of his saffron and yellow robes, retied his hair, and replaced the headpiece Sozin had gifted him. “Are we to begin those lessons after we return to the Southern Air Temple?”

“They’ve already begun.”

Roku laughed, but his airbending master kept a straight face. “I don’t mean any disrespect, Sister Disha, but all we’ve been doing is bouncing from one relief mission to the next. I’ve learned to mend pants, sweep floors, stir stews, wrap wounds, repair huts, distribute supplies—but that’s

it.” Roku swept his arm out in imitation of a basic airbending motion. Nothing happened.

“Are those skills insignificant?”

“Of course not,” Roku said without conviction. “But I’m not here to train to be . . .”

Sister Disha waited for Roku to finish his thought. When he didn’t, she prompted, “To be what?”

Roku hesitated, but his frustration shoved the answer from his lips. “A servant.”

A look of disappointment crossed the Air Nun’s face. “Walk with me, Avatar Roku.”

They started down the main footpath. People nodded or stared as they noticed the Avatar and his airbending master walking by, and Roku attempted to return their greetings with the expected gravitas. They passed the new huts, the new school, the new temple, the new stalls of the rebuilt fish market and arrived at the beach where new boats swayed on anchored lines, their bamboo outriggers slapping gently against the water. A group of Air Nomad and Earth Kingdom children ran past, laughing and kicking up sand as they chased a dozen or so turtle-ducklings.

A light wind stirred the air, and storm clouds hung on the horizon. Hands still clasped behind her back, Sister Disha watched the waves. And kept watching. Roku crossed his arms and dropped his eyes to the sand, still uncomfortable around open water. He shifted his weight from foot to foot as he waited for her to speak. He wasn’t yet accustomed to the long stretches of silence with which the Air Nomads peppered their conversations.

Nothing else to occupy it, Roku’s attention turned to his sore feet, his aching arms, his greasy hair, his empty stomach. How he longed for those post-training hours spent at the Royal Spa when he and Sozin would lie back in the steaming tubs of water, sipping tea and snacking on fertilized turtle-duck eggs while servants trimmed their nails, brushed their hair, and massaged their shoulders. Once this conversation with Sister Disha ended, all Roku had to look forward to was a campfire she’d make him light by hand, another meatless meal, a threadbare bedroll, and a hard patch of ground.

Patience folding, Roku broke the silence. “Why don’t we do more?”

Sister Disha considered his question. “More what?”

“More good.”

“And how do you define ‘good’?”

“Progress,” Roku answered without hesitation this time.

“Tell me more.”

“As you said yourself, this village is in decline. Despite all the work we’ve put into its rebuilding, it will disappear with its elders—or with the next typhoon.”

Sister Disha didn’t disagree.

“We could establish a fund that each nation could contribute to. Then we could use that money to provide disaster relief *and* develop struggling villages like this,” Roku suggested, trying to sound more confident than he felt. But it was a clever idea, one that his own business-obsessed father might have come up with. “Help them build boats that can compete with the larger fishing vessels from Gao Ling. Teach to them how to be merchants instead of simply fishermen. Provide loans for those who wish to start new business ventures. Basically, we give those who’ve left a reason to return and those still here a reason to stay. In a generation, this could become a bustling port of commerce.”

Sister Disha kept her eyes on the waves, standing a full head shorter than Roku. “An interesting plan. But how do you suppose the leaders will feel about using their resources to boost the economies of the other nations?”

“As long as we’re assisting everyone, I don’t think they’d object.”

“Hmm.”

“What?” Roku asked, ready to defend his idea.

“We are to do this throughout the world then?”

“Wherever it’s needed.”

“And who will determine where it is needed?”

“We will.”

“You and me?”

Roku thought for a few moments before landing on the solution. “The Council of Elders at each Air Temple could do so for their regions. I—as the Avatar—could help when needed.”

Sister Disha nodded. “That’s reasonable. But who will manage the funds?”

Roku faltered as he began to grasp the scope and layers of responsibilities accumulating in his proposed endeavor. “Also the Councils, I guess. No—wait—what about a group with representatives from each nation?”

“How will the representatives be selected?” the Air Nun pressed. “Who will choose the proposals? Who will draw up the contracts? Train the individuals?”

Roku didn’t have an answer this time. She had made her point.

“Who will monitor their dealings? Audit their accounts? Evaluate the impacts upon the human realm and Spirit World? Settle disputes? Deal with those who misuse the funds?”

Her questions extinguished the nascent pride Roku had felt in his cleverness only moments before.

“This is why you are not ready to airbend,” Sister Disha said. “You have not yet learned to leave the ground.”

Roku tensed his shoulders. “Meaning?”

“You’re still thinking like a Fire National.”

“I *am* a Fire National.”

“You’re the Avatar,” she corrected with the stinging disappointment of a teacher whose pupil still failed to grasp an obvious lesson.

Roku sagged with shame, wondering if she regretted leaving her life at the Eastern Air Temple to train him.

Sister Disha placed a hand on his shoulder and softened her tone. “If you are to be a good Avatar, you must understand that you are a spirit of no nation. A spirit whose sole purpose is to maintain balance within and across the worlds. But you must be patient with yourself. History tells us this has always been a particular struggle for Fire Avatars.”

“Like Szeto?” Roku asked, referring to the last Fire Nation reincarnation of the Avatar.

“Like Szeto,” Sister Disha confirmed, withdrawing her hand.

She didn’t need to explain further. When Roku had first arrived at the Southern Air Temple, he began to devour every scroll he could find about his past lives, eager to learn about his new role. Avatar Szeto—who had also served as the Fire Lord’s Grand Advisor—was revered in the Fire Nation, but the other nations’ historians didn’t hold Szeto in such high regard. They believed Szeto’s official attachment to the Fire Nation wove

bias into every institution he helped establish, every protocol he helped craft, every decision he influenced. They warned that this would become more apparent as the years passed—and that the consequences would be disastrous. Roku found this assessment unfair and alarmist, thin on evidence and over reliant on speculation.

The group of children who had run past them earlier returned, grounding Roku back into the present moment. This time, however, it was the turtle-ducklings who were chasing the kids. Still laughing, the children ran into the water as if forgetting their tiny assailants could swim.

Sister Disha laughed.

But Roku was unable to brush off his failure so quickly. “So how do I learn to do that—to let go of my attachment to my nation?” His question was genuine. He wanted to be a good Avatar—he just wasn’t convinced he had it in him.

Her smile widened as she continued to watch the children who were screaming in mock fear as they playfully splashed the advancing turtle-ducklings. “Go for a swim.”

Roku raised an eyebrow. “A swim?”

Sister Disha nodded.

“You can’t be serious,” Roku said.

Instead of answering, she began to remove her outer robes, revealing the nearly full length of the blue arrow tattoos that ran along her arms and legs, up her back, and over the top of her head.

Although she still wore her undergarments, Roku averted his gaze. Despite having lived among the Air Nomads long enough to learn that they carried absolutely no shame when it came to their bodies, it hadn’t been long enough to unlearn the Fire Nation sense of propriety, especially when it came to women.

Paying Roku no mind, the Air Nun folded her robes neatly and set them on the sand next to her feet. Then she ran down the beach, laughing. “I’ll save you!” she called to the children and dove into the water with a gentle blast of air that made the turtle-ducklings flutter their wings and quack with annoyance.

Roku remained on the shore, envying the way they all moved as if without a care in the world, as if free.

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THE LETTING GO

That evening, the villagers and the Air Nomads gathered to celebrate their final night together before the Air Nomads and the Avatar would return to the Southern Air Temple at dawn. There were speeches, prayers, a shared meal, storytelling, poetry, music, and dancing. The festivities were set to conclude with a speech from the Avatar. The Avatar, however, was not among the people.

Roku had spent the evening alone under a palm tree outside of the village, meditating. At least that's what the others thought. It was an excuse he used often—one that could never be overused among the Air Nomads. He hated lying, which always made him feel queasy. But the mild discomfort of guilt was preferable to having to perform as the Avatar any longer than necessary.

Roku was actually rereading Jinpa's *The Lives of the Avatar* by the light of a small flame he held in his palm. He focused his attention on the opening sections for each Avatar, the parts that described how they were identified. The less recent the Avatar, the sparser the details, but the patterns were clear enough. Some, like Szeto and Yangchen, were discovered early and indisputably when they bent a second element or exhibited another one of the Avatar's spiritual gifts. Others, like Kuruk, were identified by their nation's spiritual leaders who only announced the Avatar's identity when they came of age. In those cases, it wasn't long before they began their training and proved themselves.

The story of Roku's predecessor was an anomaly, though. The Earth Kingdom had identified a powerful Earthbender of humble origins named Yun. But they'd gotten it wrong. The real Avatar would turn out to be Yun's maid, Kyoshi. Kyoshi would go on to become one of the greatest Avatars in history, living for over two hundred years, while Yun would go on to be forever known as the False Avatar who descended into madness.

Since the moment of the Fire Sages' announcement, Roku had wondered if they had gotten it wrong too. Perhaps it was supposed to be his

brother or Sozin—they'd all been born on the same day. Perhaps what had happened with Yun and Kyoshi was a symptom of some growing disconnect between the human realm and Spirit World, and Roku was another False Avatar. When Roku had voiced this concern, the Fire Sages scoffed. The Earth Kingdom's failings reflected their leaders' corruption and spiritual shortcomings, they assured him. The Fire Nation method—which involved burning inscribed bones and reading the resulting fissures—was pure and infallible.

Despite the fact Roku was already an accomplished Firebender—second only to Sozin among their class at the Academy—their reassurances had not dispelled Roku's self-doubt. Besides failed attempts to bend the other elements when he was alone, Roku had also tried in vain to commune with the Spirit World or connect with his past lives.

Determined to try again, Roku let the fire in his palm burn out and set aside the scroll. He eyed a small leaf on the ground a few paces in front of him and took a deep breath. As he held it in, he focused on channeling his energy in the same way he did with firebending. Then he blew the air out through his mouth in a long, forceful exhale.

The leaf didn't stir.

"Careful," someone said nearby. "I don't think the village will survive another typhoon."

Roku looked up to find a smirking Air Nomad leaning on his staff. The pale, bald-headed boy had a sleepy-eyed look and was short and scrawny. He didn't have his arrows yet, which wasn't surprising given that he seemed at least a couple years younger than Roku.

Roku had seen him around before and knew the kid's name was Gyatso, but they'd never had a real conversation. From what the others said, Gyatso had been having trouble airbending, and Sister Disha had taken special interest in trying to help him—special interest that probably should have been reserved for training the Avatar.

"Want to show me how it's done?" Roku asked, rubbing salt in the wound they both knew was there.

Gyatso ignored the question, pretending it didn't bother him. "Sister Disha wanted me to tell you that you don't have to give that speech anymore."

Roku's eyes widened. "Really?"

“Not really,” Gyatso said. “You do. And it’s time. Also, I really hope it’s better than the last one you gave. At least try to pronounce *this* village’s name correctly.”

“Whatever. It was really cold last time.” Roku gathered his things and stood up. “And Water Tribe names are hard to pronounce.”

“Sure. For certain people. But you do know the name, don’t you?”

Irritated, Roku changed the subject as they started walking back. “So, I heard your airbending just stopped working for no reason?”

“There’s a reason,” Gyatso muttered.

“And that reason is?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Why not?”

“You’re a spoiled brat from the Fire Nation,” Gyatso said, and though he kept his tone light, Roku detected an undercurrent of real resentment.

“Hey,” Roku said, “I thought Air Nomads were supposed to be all nice and gentle?”

“And my airbending didn’t completely stop working,” Gyatso added, ignoring Roku. “Only sometimes.”

“That’s why I’ve never seen you use your glider,” Roku said.

“Right. The last place you want your airbending to fail is when you’re hundreds of feet above the earth.”

Soon, they reached the village square. A hush fell over the people, and all eyes fell on Roku as he approached. The crowd parted so the Avatar could join Sister Disha and the village elders in the center under the starless sky.

Roku took his place and looked out over the people. He ignored Gyatso—who was hopping up periodically at the back of the crowd to make funny faces at Roku—and stood up straighter. Pretend. Like Sozin. He could do that. Inwardly, he was squirming under everyone’s unwavering attention.

“Remember,” Sister Disha had said to settle his nerves before the first time he had to give a speech, “you *are* Kyoshi. You *are* Kuruk. You *are* Yangchen. You *are* Szeto. And so on, all the way back to the beginning. Their accomplishments *are* your accomplishments.”

Roku had nodded gravely even though the sentiment brought him no additional confidence.

Standing before the people now, he pressed a fist to the base of his open palm and bowed. Then, he cleared his throat. “The storm tried to destroy . . . um . . . this place,” he said, drawing a blank on the village’s name. “But it didn’t, right? Working together, we rebuilt it.” He opened his mouth to say more—but his mind went blank. He closed it.

The silence stretched on as the crowd waited for him to continue.

People shifted. Someone scratched their arm. Someone cleared their throat. Someone coughed.

Roku glanced at Sister Disha, who offered him a slight nod of encouragement, then he turned to face his audience again. “So . . . I guess that shows . . . teamwork is really important?”

Someone at the back let out a snort of laughter—Gyatso, Roku suspected.

“Can I go back to playing now?” a little girl attempted to whisper.

“Shush,” her father said. “The Avatar’s still speaking . . . I think.”

But Roku bowed once more. “Thank you,” he concluded, forgetting to deepen his voice this time.

“That’s it?” someone said.

A smattering of applause followed, and then conversations resumed as the villagers and the Air Nomads said their final goodbyes. After the elders took turns thanking the Avatar for his assistance, Sister Disha made her way over. “You’ll improve with practice.”

Roku sighed. “Words aren’t my thing. Maybe I can be the kind of Avatar who speaks with his actions. All the more reason to begin my airbending training?”

The Air Nun put a hand on Roku’s shoulder. “Our breath gives life to our words as much as our actions. Let both matter.”



The air thinned and cooled as the Patola Mountain Range appeared on the horizon. The collection of steep, pillar-like peaks and jagged ridges jutted above the clouds in the distance like an archipelago of stone islands dusted with summer’s last green.

Throughout the sky, the Air Nomads straightened up on their sky bison and began to chatter excitedly. However, Sister Disha and Roku remained impassive—the former probably because she had mastered the principle of

detachment, and the latter because this place was not his home. Meanwhile, Gyatso—who Sister Disha had decided would ride back on Amra with her and Roku—grew sullen.

Even the sky bison began to loop and dive and sweep wide arcs as they soared through the familiar mountain sky. Roku barely had time to tighten his grip on Amra's saddle before she dropped, making his stomach lurch and his long hair trail above his head like a comet's tail.

They broke through the ceiling of clouds and into a lush valley dotted with settlements nestled into the foothills. Some of the sky bison leveled off, while others, like Amra, dipped low, sweeping close enough to the ground that they stirred the trees, whose leaves were already a fluttering mosaic of brown, red, orange, and yellow. The valley's inhabitants—who were in the middle of walking or cooking or farming or laundering—looked up with broad smiles and waved.

Roku and the Air Nomads passed the settlement and soared over the barley and taro fields beyond. They traced the shimmering river that cut through the valley; some of the sky bison flew low enough to let their toes skim the water's surface before rising back into the sun-drenched realm above the clouds.

Soon, the Southern Air Temple itself came into view. It was a collection of tall, blue-spired white towers clustered atop one of the highest peaks. Steep stone staircases, arching bridges, and spiraling tunnels connected one level of the tiered community to the next, interrupted by the occasional courtyard or patio.

"This used to be my favorite part," Gyatso grumbled from his place on the saddle across from Roku. His staff lay across his lap, his envious eyes on the other Air Nomads.

Roku followed his gaze. One by one, they stood and hopped off their sky bison into thin air. They flicked open their gliders' wings as they fell, arcing back upward and soaring toward the temple like a flock of cranes.

"In time," Sister Disha consoled Gyatso.

Gyatso looked away.

Free of their riders, the other sky bison flew off to graze or rest or play, joined by several winged lemurs who were as happy to see their furry friends as the Air Nomads were to see their temple.

Bending the air around her expertly, Amra slowed as she descended, landing soft as a whisper onto one of the temple's courtyards on the lower level. Two of the Air Monks who sat on the Council of Elders, Abbot Rabten and Monk Youdron, waited to greet them next to a cart full of cabbages. Sister Disha drifted gently off the saddle, while Roku slid down inelegantly, stumbling as he hit the ground. He reached out a hand to help Gyatso, but Gyatso hopped down on his own, bowed to the elder monks, and disappeared into the temple.

Abbot Rabten sighed while he watched the boy go. "Still no progress?" he asked Sister Disha as Monk Youdron began tossing cabbage after cabbage into Amra's waiting mouth.

"I'm afraid not." Sister Disha scratched Amra behind the horns, making the beast grumble contentedly as she continued to eat.

If Roku weren't there, he was sure they might have had the same exchange about him instead of Gyatso. But since he was, he greeted the monks politely and endured their questions about his first complete season of relief trips with the Air Nomads.

Yes, it had been instructive, humbling.

Yes, it felt good to help those in need regardless of nation. But, yes, of course, it was about helping because we are all connected and not because of the feeling helping gives us.

Yes, Sister Disha was an excellent teacher. He had already learned so much from her.

Yes, he would continue to meditate and reflect on the experiences.

Yes, he was looking forward to a season studying and training at the temple before another season of relief trips.

Yes, he was tired from the long journey and needed to rest.

After an appropriate amount of time, Roku excused himself to meditate. He thanked Amra and Sister Disha, then returned to his quarters.

It was a small, simple room furnished with a bed, a desk, a meditation cushion woven from sky bison wool, and a chamber pot. The ceilings were vaulted, the floor and walls bare. Air and light flowed freely through the open windows cut into the stone making it perpetually drafty. Though located in the lower levels of the temple's central tower, the furnishings were nearly indistinguishable from any other room Roku had managed to peek into.

That the Air Nomads would house the Avatar in such a sad little hovel had initially surprised him. Then he had learned that there was actually a much nicer room permanently set aside for the Avatar's current incarnation—but Sister Disha insisted he not yet be allowed to use it. Resentment replaced surprise. Apparently, one of many lessons in humility.

The most recent lesson: a knock at his door.

Roku answered it to find a young, surprisingly muscular monk whose name he couldn't remember holding a small wooden chest. He bowed and passed the box to Roku along with a brief note. Roku thanked the beefy monk, closed the door, and carried the chest over to his desk. Intrigued, he read the note:

Avatar Roku,

This box contains message scrolls that arrived for you while we were traveling. Some come from your friends and family in the Fire Nation. Others are from those across the world who seek the Avatar's help with one matter or another. You asked me how you might learn detachment. Here is a way to begin: Read not a single one.

—Sister Disha

Roku set the note aside, sat down on the meditation cushion in Lotus position, and closed his eyes. He took several deep breaths to center himself and clear his mind. His firebending training had taught him to focus on the pause after each inhale, on transforming each breath into potential firebending energy. Instead, he tried to do as Sister Disha encouraged him to do and shift his focus to the moment after each exhale. The emptiness, the lightness, the letting go.

But his mind burned with curiosity about the contents of the messages. He couldn't care less about what his parents had to say, but he longed to read comforting words from his grandmother. Sozin would surely have written him several messages by now, and Roku itched to hear his friend complain about how the Fire Lord wasn't entrusting him with enough responsibility, joke about how maladjusted to an ascetic life with the Air Nomads Roku must feel, and share news of their classmates. Maybe there was even a note from Ta Min. It wasn't likely, but who knew.

Roku also wondered about the scope of requests for help he might have already received. It was possible that the chest contained a plea from one of

the Earth Kingdom monarchs or one of the Water Tribe chiefs.

Was Sister Disha serious—did she truly expect him to ignore those who loved him and those who might need his help?

Roku took one more deep breath and opened his eyes. He went back to the desk, lifted the box's lid, and breathed in the scent of ink and parchment. It couldn't hurt to skim a few. After all the work he'd done on all those relief missions, surely he had earned it.

Roku selected one that smelled of home, unrolled the message, and began to read.

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A WAY THROUGH

Sozin considered the Pai Sho board as he waited for his turn. It rested on a low crate in the center of the cramped, windowless cabin he'd rented aboard the ship. On the other side sat his opponent, Dalisay, his sister's tutor-turned-ex-girlfriend. She was deciding on her move as she rambled on about the advantages and disadvantages of different fluxes in steel production. Kozaru, their stocky and short-haired companion, watched the game unfold as she leaned against the wall with her burn-scarred, muscular arms crossed over her chest. All the while, a candle flickered on a rickety shelf and the room swayed gently with the sea.

Sozin had made a terrible move with his White Lotus tile on his previous turn to test Dalisay. She was the smartest person he knew, so she should have had no problem realizing that she could gain the upper hand with a Wheel or a Boat—which Sozin suspected she held, given the probabilities of what tiles remained unplaced. But Dalisay continued with her lecture, resting her fingers elegantly on one tile before changing her mind and moving them to another and then another. Finally, she concluded whatever she was saying about impurities and alloys and placed her tile.

Sozin sighed. Dalisay had “overlooked” his obvious mistake. She couldn't even meet his eyes.

Roku had never let him win. Their games were hard-fought, lasting for hours and often ending in a draw. The last time they had played was a few nights before Roku's departure. Sozin had overreached with his relentlessly aggressive style, and Roku's more patient and conservative approach paid off as he formed a Harmony Ring that Sozin had overlooked. Sozin lit the board aflame and accused Roku of cheating, while Roku simply leaned back with a self-satisfied smile and his fingers laced behind his head.

“Next time,” Sozin had threatened.

Now, Sozin shifted his gaze from Dalisay to Kozaru. The latter was terrible at Pai Sho, the kind of player who knew the rules but had no desire to improve. But at least her loss in the previous game had been honest.

Sozin rubbed his chin and looked back at the board, pretending to puzzle over his next move to mask his disappointment. Fire Lord Taiso had always impressed upon Prince Sozin the importance of surrounding himself with loyal people who could serve him well in the future, and now he was wondering if he'd made a mistake recruiting these two.

When Dalisay and Zeisan had been dating, his sister hadn't been able to shut up about the brilliant girl who had risen from the servant class on Ember Island. But how useful were her brains if she held herself back?

Kozaru, on the other hand, had come to Sozin's attention after she'd defeated one of his private firebending tutors in an Agni Kai a couple years ago. She was a formidable fighter, but Roku had succinctly summed up the most pressing concern the first time they'd met her: "She seems like the kind of person who'd slit your throat for a silver piece and a healthy pig-chicken."

Again, Sozin sighed.

He was about to go ahead and initiate a sequence of moves that would bring this farce to a close in three more turns, when the boat lurched forward. The Pai Sho board slid off the crate, spilling the tiles and sending them skittering across the wooden floor as Sozin, Kozaru, and Dalisay braced their hands against the narrow walls to keep themselves upright. Chaotic footsteps began to sound through the planks of the deck overhead.

"See what that was," Sozin commanded Kozaru.

But before she could move, the junk's captain, a rough-looking pirate, burst through the door. "We're here, Lee," is all she said before disappearing.

"Lee" was the fake name he'd used when he'd hired her ship. Because although the Fire Nation Navy was usually at his disposal as prince, this was not official Fire Nation business. In fact, the Fire Lord had expressly denied Sozin's request to take a ship, stretched as thin as they were these days with the Outer Island Rebellions.

So he'd recruited Dalisay and Kozaru, outfitted them all in the clothes of commoners, and paid a pirate enough to follow orders without asking questions.

In a moment, Sozin would find out if the payment was worth it.

Trailed by Kozaru and Dalisay, he climbed the narrow steps to the deck and came up into a fog so thick the crew looked like spirits appearing and

disappearing as they ran about and hoisted the junk's ribbed sails to the sounds of rustling canvas, whirring ropes, and rattling pulleys. So dense was the mist that neither end of the ship was visible from where he stood, let alone the waves upon which the vessel sailed or any land that might be looming on the horizon.

He had expected this. According to what he'd read, fog perpetually cloaked the island, keeping it hidden over thousands of years except to those who knew its exact coordinates. For any ship that happened upon it sitting in the middle of the sea like an unmoving cloud, it was an easy enough decision to steer clear of its unknown dangers.

Yet fog alone didn't mean that this was it, so Sozin suppressed his growing excitement as he approached the captain, drawing himself up to his full height.

"We've set anchor," she explained without taking her eyes off some obscured point in the distance. "This is as close as I'm willing to get."

"Are you certain this is the right island?"

"I'm certain we're right here." She pointed at the marked spot on the ancient map he'd provided, then handed it back to him. "Whether there's an island in the middle of that spirit soup is up to you to find out."

"The landing boat is ready and stocked with provisions?" Dal asked.

The captain nodded.

"How can we trust you won't pull anchor and sail away the moment we're off your ship?" Kozaru asked, glowering.

The captain scoffed. "Because I need the other half of my payment to buy that villa in the capital I've had my eye on."



The captain had offered a couple members of her own crew—for an additional fee, of course—to help steer the landing boat safely ashore. Sozin declined. They didn't need the help. Living on an archipelago meant nearly all Fire Nationals knew their way around an oar, and they were no exception. Besides, it was already enough of a risk that a whole crew of pirates were aware the island existed. He didn't need any of them snooping around to discover its true value.

The three gathered their packs and climbed into the small boat. The pirates lowered them until they hit the water's surface with a jolt. Kozaru

untied the ropes, pushed off, and took a seat at one oar while Dalisay took the other. Sozin positioned himself at the bow and peered ahead. He could only see a few feet of waves in any direction before everything dissolved into the gray-white wall of fog.

“If you tell us what you’re looking for, we might be of more help,” Dalisay prompted as she and Kozaru began to row, the boat rocking with the sea.

Sozin squinted ahead. “As I told you before, something very important.”

“As fulfilling as that explanation was, what could be all the way out here?”

“A dragon?” Kozaru guessed.

“When you need to know more, I’ll tell you more,” Sozin said, his words sharp and final.

Dalisay let out a frustrated sigh and kept rowing.

Sozin didn’t fully trust them yet, and that was part of the reason he didn’t reveal more. The other reason he would never admit aloud.

Ever since Roku’s departure three months ago, Fire Lord Taiso kept pestering Sozin to write to his friend to maintain the strength of their bond. But when message after message went unanswered, the Fire Lord’s disappointment deepened. If Sozin and Roku no longer had a relationship, then perhaps the Fire Nation would not have another Avatar serve as Grand Advisor. Perhaps his father would feel he had overestimated Sozin.

Sozin, however, never gave up. He would find a way to make himself indispensable to his father and his nation. And the inspiration for how he might do this came from a memory.

When they were younger, Sozin, Yasu, and Roku would slip through the palace’s secret passages and sneak into the Dragonbone Catacombs underneath the High Temple. Beyond the simple thrill of hanging out somewhere forbidden, the boys loved reading through the restricted scrolls the Fire Sages stored among the bones of Sozin’s ancestors.

Like many young Fire Nationals, the boys were already familiar with the tales of heroic firebending masters who could breathe fire, produce blue flames, or channel lightning. But through the ancient texts, they discovered even rarer firebending skills such as the power of flight, the ability to make a distant target explode, ways to harness the power of a comet, and even a method to extend one’s life indefinitely. Sozin was convinced it was

possible to learn these powers, but Yasu always maintained they were pure fiction. Roku, for his part, didn't care either way. He was happy to tag along.

It was on one of these adventures that Sozin came across a Szeto Era scroll titled *The Long Road* by someone named Ashō. It was a travelogue that detailed the author's journey across the world, telling of his encounters with all sorts of exotic people and fantastic spirits along the way. It was entertaining enough—humorous and bawdy—but only one of the stories stuck with Sozin throughout the years.

Ashō wrote of being hired to investigate the case of an entire ship with a crew of over two hundred that had vanished. He followed the clues to a dense fog in the middle of the sea. After his own ship plowed straight into a massive rock that nobody had seen, the crew abandoned the sinking vessel.

Ashō washed ashore on a mountainous island with fog so thick he couldn't see his own hands in front of his face. He wandered through the mist for days before stumbling upon a narrow path that led to a village nestled in a valley. The people—who had never seen anyone from the outside world before—greeted him like a king. He spent several days as their honored guest, during which time he discovered their benders had powers a thousand times stronger than any he'd ever seen before. Waterbenders who could control the weather. Airbenders who could command typhoons. Earthbenders who could produce—or sink—lands. And Firebenders who could move the sun.

The chief so adored Ashō that he agreed to teach the outsider how to strengthen his firebending—that is, until he caught Ashō sleeping with his daughter. Ashō barely escaped the island with his life.

It was with this story in mind that Sozin had approached his father a few weeks ago. The Fire Lord had been sitting several steps above upon the imperial throne, the ornate carving of an enormous and fierce golden dragon looming over him.

“Tell me you've finally heard from Roku,” said the Fire Lord, amber eyes smoldering with preemptive dismay.

Sozin kneeled. “Not yet, Father.”

The Fire Lord scowled. “Then what is it?”

“I'd like permission to take a ship.”

“To what end?”

Sozin cleared his throat, then stumbled through a summary of Ashō's story of the foggy island. It had been years since he'd read it, but he recalled every detail perfectly due to his uncanny ability to remember everything he read. When he got to the end, he declared, "I'd like to search for the island."

Fire Lord Taiso didn't say anything for a long time. He just stared at his son in complete and utter disappointment. "No."

"No?"

"No."

Sozin understood that the single word was a dismissal. But he did not move. "Why not?"

"Why not?" Fire Lord Taiso scoffed. "You will not waste your time and our nation's resources chasing after some childish fantasy." He shook his head. "You really believe a Firebender can grow strong enough move the sun?"

"I do." Sozin's words were firm.

"Then you are as much a fool as I feared." The fires flared in the braziers that lined the throne room.

Sozin looked down.

Fire Lord Taiso held the silence, letting the insult singe the air between them. Finally, he said, "You cannot rest on your birthright alone, Sozin. It is obvious to everyone that Zeisan would make a much better leader—unfortunately she was not born a Firebender, so the clans and sages will never follow her. But neither will you gain their true loyalty if it becomes widely known you believe such nonsense. A nation is only as strong as its leader. Therefore, never speak of this again. Go. Invest your time studying history, philosophy, economics, the sciences. Proper subjects for a future Fire Lord. And write Roku another letter. Do not come before me again without his response."

"Yes, Father," Sozin said and quickly rose to his feet then left.

But he had no intention of listening to his father. Instead, he put out the word among his seedier contacts that he would pay handsomely for anything written by a man named Ashō. In a matter of days, an ancient map made its way into Sozin's hands. It depicted the sea southeast of the Fire Nation and showed a number of islands along a portion of the volcanic

Sibuyan chain Sozin didn't even know existed, each labeled with the same handwriting as *The Long Road*.

And around one of those islands, Ashō had drawn swirling fog.

And now, water beneath the landing boat growing shallow, Sozin was certain he had found it in real life.

Kozaru and Dalisay rowed the boat expertly past the rocky mouth of a small cove and through the calm waters of the bay. They hopped out and dragged the landing boat ashore.

Sozin swung his pack onto his shoulder, sheathed his sword, and stepped out onto the sand with a sense of historical significance. It was not with a reply from Roku that he would return to Fire Lord Taiso but with firebending strong enough to move the sun. And when that day came, his father would no longer mourn Zeisan's lack of firebending or reprimand Sozin about what a nation's leader needed.

"Where to now, Prince Sozin?" Dalisay asked.

The air was damp and still thick with fog. The morning sun hung low over the horizon, a dim, barely perceptible glow. Though they heard waves crashing behind them and birdsong ahead, they could see only a dozen feet or so in any direction. It gave the impression that the small patch of beach upon which they stood was all that existed. An entire army could be camped a hundred feet down the coast and they wouldn't be able to see each other.

"Follow me," Sozin said. "And be ready."

"For what?" Kozaru asked, cracking her knuckles.

"Anything. Anyone."

"Ah, so there's something important on this island *and* the island is inhabited," Dalisay noted as she coiled her rope dart. "Nice to know a second fact about this job."

"You also know it's covered in fog," Sozin said, examining their very limited surroundings. "That makes three."

"I might need to start writing this all down."

Kozaru chuckled from somewhere in the fog where she had ventured to find a tree to which she could tie the small boat. She reappeared a few moments later without the rope, presumably having accomplished the task.

"Let's go," Sozin said and started walking away from the water.

Kozaru and Dalisay followed. Sand and beach gave way to soil and palms. The sound of crashing waves faded, replaced by chirping birds and

buzzing insects. The vegetation grew denser, the trees taller, their trunks and limbs carpeted in vivid shades of feathery green moss. Sozin and Kozaru soon had to use their firebending to slash-burn the vines and undergrowth that began to choke the way.

All Ashō had said was that he'd gotten lost in the mountains and stumbled upon a path that led to a village nestled in a valley. So Sozin took it as a good sign when they began to climb uphill.

Beside a small stream, they ate a quick lunch of sliced cucumbers, rice balls, Komodo-rhino jerky, and tea, then kept moving. The daylight started to dim. The birds grew quiet, the insects louder. In the distance, some unseen creature let out a blood-curdling howl, making the hair on the back of Sozin's neck stand up.

"Sounds like a hog-monkey," Dalisay guessed.

"Sounds like dinner," Kozaru said, scratching her short, scruffy hair.

Sozin said nothing.

Spirit soup, the pirate captain had said of the fog.

There was indeed something inhuman about this place. The longer they spent in the mist and the deeper they traveled, the more unsettled Sozin felt by its strange energy. But when evening fell, the fog inexplicably dissipated. Any relief Sozin felt, however, was dampened with the realization that the darkness was so complete that even with the light from the flames he and Kozaru held in their open palms, it limited their visibility as much as the mist.

"This might be a good place to rest for the night," Dalisay suggested as they stepped into a small clearing, a patch of stars visible overhead. The ground was pocked with rocks and boulders, but it didn't take them long to find a few flat areas with space enough for three bedrolls.

Sozin nodded.

They dropped their packs, stretched their limbs, and set up camp. They'd make dinner, sleep in shifts, and then find the path in the morning.



Sozin woke in the middle of the night to Kozaru's face mere inches in front of his own.

"Something's out there, boss," she whispered, hot breath smelling of Komodo-rhino meat.

Silently, Sozin picked up his sword and stood. Next to him, Dalisay was already on her feet with her rope dart in her slender hands. Their ears strained as their eyes scanned the shadows beyond the glowing embers of their campfire.

They held still. For a long time, they heard nothing except the usual night sounds. But then came the unmistakable rustling of leaves and snapping of twigs. Something—or someone—was rushing toward them through the vegetation.

They fanned out in fighting stances and faced the approaching threat, Sozin in the middle.

The quick rustling grew louder, nearer.

Whatever approached was moving fast and would be upon them in seconds.

Dalisay began swinging her rope dart. Kozaru clenched her fists. Sozin took a deep breath and adjusted his grip on his sword.

Three wild cow-pigs shot out of the undergrowth. They sprinted past the three Fire Nationals and disappeared back into the darkness.

Dalisay nodded in the animals' direction. "*They* could be dinner."

Kozaru started after them—but then two people burst through the brush from which the wild cow-pigs had appeared. They stopped short at the sight of Sozin and his companions, eyes going wide. They were older, muscular men—one tall, one short—breathing hard in green and pale yellow Earth Kingdom armor that looked like it had seen better days. They must have been hunting the cow-pigs, Sozin realized.

"Who are—" the taller of the two started to say.

But before he could finish, Dalisay's rope dart sailed toward the tall man's heart as Kozaru jabbed rapid bursts of fire at the short one. A shield of rock rose from the ground, deflected both attacks, then flew forward. Dalisay's rope wound around her arm as she spun out of the way, and Kozaru side kicked a fire blast that reduced the wall to rubble.

Sozin felt a jolt of excitement.

Benders.

He'd found them.

But why were they wearing Earth Kingdom military uniforms?

Sozin started to call out for everyone to stop fighting when the tall man flung several shards of sharp rock at him. Sozin sidestepped, and they sunk

into the tree trunk behind him like a dozen throwing knives. Leaving Kozaru and Dal to deal with the shorter Earthbender, Sozin advanced toward the taller one, eager to test himself against enhanced earthbending.

The Earthbender flung a small boulder. Sozin slashed his sword, turning it to dust. Backing up, the Earthbender launched two more. Sozin deflected them easily enough and kept pressing forward. The Earthbender tossed a boulder the size of an armadillo-bear. Sozin dove forward and rolled under it, starting to feel a twinge of disappointment. Maybe this wasn't the right island after all.

The Earthbender armored himself in rock as Sozin came out of the roll and unleashed an unrelenting flurry of slashes and punches and kicks. Metal clanged against stone. Fire crackled, scorching the rock. Sozin struck hit after hit, but neither blade nor flames penetrated the armor.

As Sozin took a moment to reassess, the Earthbender went on the offensive. He swung heavy fists in wide, sweeping arcs, which Sozin easily ducked and dodged.

"We got the short guy!" Kozaru called from the distance. "On our way to you!"

The Earthbender took advantage of Sozin's momentary distraction and struck Sozin in the center of the chest with a rock-encased fist. Sozin flew backward and hit the ground hard, the wind knocked out of his lungs, his heart feeling as if it'd stopped.

Before Sozin could get back to his feet, the Earthbender snatched Sozin off the ground and gathered him into a crushing hug. Every bone in Sozin's body felt on the verge of snapping or crumbling, every organ as if it were about to pop. His vision tunneled as he started to lose consciousness.

But before he did, he took one last breath.

Channeling what remained of his energy, Sozin let out a sudden pulse of heat. The surge shattered the Earthbender's armor and knocked the two of them apart.

Ignoring the pain that thrummed through his muscles, Sozin sprang to his feet, rushed over to the fallen Earthbender, and grabbed the man by the collar.

"I thought you were supposed to be stronger," Sozin said.

The Earthbender merely groaned, eyes out of focus.

Sozin glanced at the man's body. Several shards of the stone that had protected his body mere moments ago were now lodged into his stomach, and he was slowly bleeding out. He didn't have long.

"Where's your village?" Sozin asked.

"W—wh—what?" the man sputtered. "Village?"

"Where. Do. You. Live."

"We don't . . . we don't live here."

Confusion clouded Sozin's face. "What do you mean?"

The man coughed several times. Blood leaked from his mouth. "We're here with the . . . Kingdom . . ."

His mouth went slack. His eyes glazed over. His breathing stopped.

Sozin released the man's collar, letting the body fall lifelessly to the ground. Then he stood up and took a few steps back.

Relief that he had survived came first. Then, a hollow horror snaked through his veins until both his body and mind went numb. Though unintentional, it was the first life he had ever taken.

Kozaru and Dalisay arrived a few moments later, Kozaru dragging a body behind her. She dropped it next to the man Sozin had just killed, then clapped Sozin hard on the back. "Look at you, killer! Guess you're more than some pampered prince."

Sozin blinked, emerging from his shock. Kozaru's cheer was overwhelming, a clear sign that her respect for Sozin had grown. But Dalisay's face had gone pale, and she kept her distance from them both. *She* wasn't impressed by Sozin—but she feared him in a new way. Which, Sozin supposed, was another form of respect. Was killing really all it took?

Sozin cleared his throat and forced a smile. "No match for the Prince of the Fire Nation," he declared. Then his gaze fell upon the shabby armor that covered the dead. "But the Earth Kingdom is here. This changes things."

"What do you want to do?" Dalisay asked, clearly still shaken by the sudden violence.

"Find their base and burn it to the ground," Kozaru suggested. "I wasn't asking you."

Sozin reviewed the facts. These men were not native inhabitants. They wore old Earth Kingdom armor. They were out hunting wild cow-pigs in the mountains in the middle of the night.

“The Earth Kingdom Army must have established a presence out here at some point,” he said. “A military outpost, but not a very important one.”

“Right,” Dalisay confirmed, coming back to herself now that her mind was turning again. “Otherwise, they’d be stocked with enough provisions that their soldiers wouldn’t have to scrounge the mountains for food. Think they’re here for the same important ‘thing’ you’re searching for?”

Sozin stroked his chin. “Maybe. More likely, they stumbled upon the island through dumb luck and are trying to claim it for the Earth Kingdom.”

Kozaru smashed her fist into her palm. “Then let’s track down whoever else they’ve got here and remind them who properly owns it.”

“And start a war?” Dalisay asked.

Sozin needed to get the Earth Kingdom off the island, but Dalisay was right. At best, engaging their forces directly would surely draw the Fire Lord’s attention to his unsanctioned activities. At worst, it would shatter nearly two hundred years of so-called peace.

It would have to be done quietly, and it could not be traced back to Sozin or the Fire Nation.

“We return to the ship,” Sozin finally decided.

Dalisay and Kozaru exchanged confused looks.

“Wait—we’re retreating?” Kozaru asked, incredulous.

Sozin shook his head. He never gave up. If the path was blocked, he found a way through. And Kozaru’s suggestion had given him an idea for what that way might be.

The only problem was that it was going to require Sozin to do something he did not want to do: follow his father’s advice.

A VISITOR

Roku was in the middle of sweeping when he heard footsteps approaching over his broom's scratching. It was the cherub-faced Abbot Rabten, the Air Monk in charge of the Southern Air Temple. "Good morning, Avatar Roku," he said with a deep bow.

Roku paused the task at hand and returned the greeting. "It might be a better one if Sister Disha didn't assign me to clean the crematorium once again."

Abbot Rabten looked around casually. It was a small, blue-spired pavilion set apart from the main buildings atop a smaller neighboring peak. There was space for people to gather, bordered by a small, well-tended garden. The stone floor was carved from the mountainside, charred and ashen in the center from the countless funeral pyres that had burned over the centuries. "Does it bother you?" he asked.

Roku leaned on his broom. "It's a bit unnerving."

"Why is that?"

"Hard to say. Maybe all the death?"

"Is not death a natural part of life?"

"Sure."

"We inhale; we exhale," Abbot Rabten explained anyway. "We borrow from the Earth; we return to the Earth. We are physical; we are spiritual. And when we leave this world, we continue to exist in all the ways seen and unseen in which we influenced the lives around us."

"Right," Roku said, not unaware of these lessons. "I understand." But it was obvious the chore was another one of Sister Disha's efforts to encourage Roku to meditate on the principle of detachment. With the added twist of probably hoping he'd consider fire's role in the cremation process.

"If you understand, then why does it bring you unease?"

Roku stiffened then went back to sweeping the fallen leaves and pine needles that blew in with the wind. "At least it hasn't been used in a while," he said, dodging the question.

Abbot Rabten fell quiet for a few moments, as if deciding whether to push Roku to discuss what he so obviously didn't want to talk about. Instead, he chuckled gently. "But important to keep it in working order. You never know when one of us elders may need it." Sparing Roku from having to respond, he went on. "The reason I am here, however, is to let know you that you have a visitor."

Stunned, Roku stopped sweeping again and looked up. "A visitor?"

Abbot Rabten nodded.

"How?" Roku asked. The air temples were built in notoriously difficult places to reach, accessible only to those riding animals that could fly or scale the steepest of cliffs.

And before the abbot could answer, Roku added, "Who?" None of the messages he had received so far—which he'd continued to read despite Sister Disha's advice—indicated any real emergencies. Those from Sozin and his family made it seem as if their lives were continuing as before, as if he'd never left. Those from people seeking help were minor matters, mostly thinly veiled attempts to engage the Avatar's assistance with situations that could bolster the sender's financial, social, or political prospects.

"A young woman who found a monk in one of the nearby villages and convinced him to bring her on his sky bison," Abbot Rabten said. "She said her name was Ta Min."

"Ta Min?" Roku repeated. "Are you certain?"

The elder monk nodded once more.

The idea of unexpectedly seeing Ta Min in person made Roku thrum with excitement—but also confusion. They'd run in the same social circles for years since both their ancestral clans were part of Fire Nation nobility, but they had never exchanged any meaningful words. Roku had been too intimidated. She was too smart, too beautiful, too everything. Even when Sozin kept prodding Roku to make a move after he was named Avatar, Roku had failed to work up the courage. So why would she come here now?

"Sister Disha," Abbot Rabten added, "would like us to turn the young woman away."

Roku scoffed—as respectfully as he could. He was sick of Sister Disha's lessons. He might feel differently if his airbending master were training him in any actual airbending, but she continued to maintain that he wasn't "mentally, emotionally, or spiritually ready." Besides, in the Fire

Nation, it would be considered supremely rude to refuse a visitor who had traveled so far, no matter who they were.

“I’ll see her,” Roku said.

“Very well,” said Abbot Rabten evenly, betraying no indication of his feelings toward Roku’s disobedience. “I’ll request she meet you here as soon as she’s ready.”

Roku looked around the crematorium. “Please tell her I’ll be in the Floating Garden.”



Roku’s breath hitched when he laid eyes on Ta Min. She walked through the sky blue torii gate, then crossed one of the small foot bridges that arched over a koi pond, wearing formal Fire Nation robes layered with crimson, ruby, and pale rose. Her dark brown hair was tied up in a complicated bun held in place with a pair of intricately carved golden hair sticks, a few strands left free to frame her face.

She came to a stop a few steps in front of Roku, then bowed in the Fire Nation way. When she rose back to her full height, she smiled. Her gray eyes took him in, and his own gaze shifted to one of the features he loved most about her—the mole that sat below the corner of her left eye. “Avatar Roku,” she greeted.

Like a fire revived from ashes, Roku’s longing for a different life flared, burning brighter than it had even in his first few days at the Southern Air Temple. And with it, his longing for the future that had been stolen from him with the Fire Sages’ announcement—a future that might have included Ta Min. It was almost enough to make him regret not heeding Sister Disha’s advice.

Almost.

Roku returned her bow like an Air Nomad, doing his best to follow Sozin’s advice and pretend not to be nervous. “Welcome to the Southern Air Temple.”

Amused, she took in his new look. “Strange to see you in the Air Nomad robes. Are they as . . . comfortable as they appear?”

Roku looked down at his outfit. “They’re extremely . . . airy. Unfortunately, they don’t do much for my figure.”

She didn't disagree. "At least you still have your hair. They didn't make you shave it off?"

Roku touched the Crown Prince's headpiece, then combed his fingers through his long, black silken hair. "Avatars often do when training with the Air Nomads, but it's not a requirement. Fire Avatars traditionally don't."

"Makes sense," she said. Fire Nationals regarded their hair as sacred. Only the closest of family members even touched each other's heads. Cutting it beyond the customary length was usually a sign of public atonement. The more that was cut, the deeper the shame. Shaving it off entirely signified a complete denouncement—or rejection—of nationality.

Ta Min sighed. "Sozin will be disappointed, though."

"Why's that?"

"He was eager to know if your head was as misshapen as he'd suspected."

They laughed, and Roku realized how much he missed the cutting sarcasm of his homeland. The Airbender sense of humor was like that of small children, laughing at simple, straightforward amusements. Word play. Breaking wind. Sky bison calves or winged lemurs tumbling over as they played. Things of that nature. They didn't make jokes at the expense of others, even in jest—with the exception of Gyatso.

As if of the same mind, Roku and Ta Min began to stroll through the Floating Garden side-by-side, neither leading. It was Roku's favorite area of the temple even if it was a fraction of the size of the Royal Gardens back in the capital. There were the usual trees and flowering shrubs and stones arranged like islands in raked gravel. Benches, koi ponds, small shrines, statues of various animals and Air Nomads. But since it was built into the side of a mountain, the garden was more vertical than any other he'd ever seen, with astonishing views of the surrounding peaks from every vantage point along its spiraling footpaths.

"Before you begin to worry," Ta Min said, "your parents are healthy, and your clan's business affairs are thriving. Actually, I've heard they're doing better than ever since the announcement."

"That's good," Roku said, feeling a slight prick of shame. He'd been so excited to see Ta Min that he hadn't actually been thinking of his family at all. "My father must be thrilled. And how are your people?"

"They're well too, thank you."

The conversation faltered, awkwardness threatening to wedge its way in. Roku scratched the back of his head and tried to think of a thoughtful, considerate question. But all Roku could imagine was Sozin cracking up at his lack of romantic grace.

“How’s the training going?” Ta Min asked first. “Have you mastered airbending yet?”

“It’s . . . progressing.”

“Glad to hear. Maybe you can take me out on one of those gliders later? I’ve always wanted to ride one.”

“Sure,” Roku said. He wasn’t certain if she was joking, but if she wasn’t, that might motivate him to finally do some airbending. Maybe he could get one of the younger Air Nomads to tutor him after dinner.

She smiled and brushed a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

“And how’s life after graduating from the University?” he asked. He’d always been fascinated by her decision to attend the University instead of the Academy even though she was a Firebender. In fact, it was after he’d heard about her decision that he’d divulged his crush on her to Sozin.

Ta Min shook her head. “Frustrating.”

“Oh?”

They paused at a small pond. Koi fish rose to the surface, white and gold and black scales shimmering in the water. Their whiskered mouths gulped at the air, expecting to be fed.

“Like yours, my father’s stuck in the old ways. Despite my education, he refuses to let me help with the clan’s businesses. He says that as the eldest daughter ‘in my blossoming years,’ I should be focused on securing the right marriage.”

Roku swallowed nervously. Had he lost his chance?

“Your clan is one of the wealthiest in the Fire Nation,” he said, pretending that his spirits were not deflating. “That shouldn’t be an issue.”

“Generally, no. But he has his sights set on joining our blood-line to that of the royal family’s.”

A terrible feeling settled in the pit of Roku’s stomach. “Sozin.”

Ta Min nodded.

But Sozin knew how Roku felt about her. Surely, he wouldn’t betray his closest friend like that. “And you—”

“Have no intention of marrying before I’m ready,” Ta Min interrupted. “And I’m not ready. Nothing against your friend.”

“You could do worse,” he said, relieved.

She snuck a glance at Roku. “I could do better.”

Roku smiled, hope reviving.

They continued meandering down the garden, and they soon reached the gate that marked its end. With the garden set at the base of the temple grounds, a layer of clouds was suspended just below their feet. It was as if they were standing together on the shore of some soft sea.

“But he’s actually the reason I’m here,” Ta Min said, adjusting her voice to a more formal register. “Prince Sozin, that is.”

“Ah,” Roku said, feeling a flicker of disappointment that she had not come all this way to profess her undying love for him.

“I’m here to deliver a message.”

“Would have been easier to send a hawk.”

“It’s an important message,” Ta Min said as she turned to face Roku, clasping her hands together under the sleeves of her robes. “One that he does not wish anyone to intercept.”

“Not even Fire Lord Taiso, I’m guessing?”

“Especially not his father,” Ta Min confirmed.

Roku chuckled. As much as Sozin longed for his father’s approval, he was forever disobeying the man. “So what’s he up to now?”

Ta Min looked around. “Are we alone here?”

Roku turned to a nearby statue of a meditating Airbender, peered into her stony face, and knocked twice upon her arrowed forehead. “Unless these Airbenders are even better at meditating than we know, we should be okay.”

Ta Min ignored the joke. “Sozin has information that the Earth Kingdom has been trying to quietly expand its boundaries ever since before Kyoshi died.”

Roku stroked his chin as he considered the news, hoping Ta Min noticed his new facial hair. The Earth Kingdom trying to expand wasn’t surprising given their insatiable appetite for resources. And Roku had been spending plenty of time in the temple’s library reading about the transitions between Avatars so he understood that the stretch of time between when the previous Avatar died and the next reincarnation came of age was the perfect

opportunity for bandits or merchants or governments to make some moves. Nothing too bold, though, lest they make themselves the next Avatar's first target. Since Kyoshi lived to be two hundred and thirty years old, there had to be a great number of people itching to advance their schemes.

"I appreciate Sozin keeping me apprised of world affairs," Roku said after a few moments, "but I'm guessing there's more to the message?"

Ta Min nodded. "Several weeks ago, a Fire Nation patrol discovered an Earth Kingdom military presence in Fire Nation territory—they're trying to steal one of our outer islands."

"Which island?" Roku asked, surprised by the boldness of such a move.

"An unnamed one in the Sibuyan chain to the south. Small enough that it doesn't appear on most maps."

"Inhabited?"

"A handful of uncontacted natives," Ta Min said. Then she delivered the official ask: "Sozin wants you to travel to the island and persuade the Earth Kingdom to leave and relinquish their claim. He believes that if anyone can make them see reason and resolve this peacefully before it turns into an international incident, it's the Avatar."

Roku considered the request as a group of winged lemurs coasted past, their shadows racing across the clouds beneath them. It was possible that the Earth Kingdom was trying to claim the island like Sozin thought. But given that the place was remote and barely populated, it seemed more likely that they had hoped to slide in and extract a bunch of timber, coal, and ore before the Fire Nation noticed.

Either way, Sozin was right. They couldn't let the Earth Kingdom steal territory or resources. Besides the issue of pride, land was scarce enough in the Fire Nation. Every island mattered, even if symbolically—hence the Fire Lord's recent campaign to crack down on the scattered Outer Island Rebellions. Roku also knew his friend well enough to guess that Sozin had brought the issue to Roku instead of Fire Lord Taiso because he wanted to prove his worth to his father. The possibility that the Fire Lord might punish Sozin for acting without approval if he failed wouldn't bother Sozin. Sozin never entertained the possibility that he could fail—because he never did.

On the other hand, Roku couldn't shake Sister Disha's voice from his head. Regardless of the situation, how would it prove to her that he'd detached from his homeland if the first mission the new Fire Avatar took up

after months of silence was in service of defending Fire Nation territory? How would that look to the world?

“What do you think?” Roku asked.

Ta Min spoke without hesitation. “If this is part of some larger design, letting the Earth Kingdom military remain on one of our islands uncontested could make them more confident—and aggressive—down the road. Still, this is a delicate situation.”

“If you were in my place, what would you do?”

“If I believed I could peacefully convince the Earth Kingdom to leave, I would.”

“And if you didn’t believe that you could?”

“Then I would leave it up to Prince Sozin.”

Roku nodded. Stroked his new facial hair some more. Inhaled, exhaled. *Could* he do it?

He’d already proven that he couldn’t wield words to much effect. And though a master of firebending, he was far from possessing a fully realized Avatar’s power, the kind of power that others feared crossing. What if he made a mistake that escalated the situation and threatened the long-lasting peace Avatar Kyoshi had established?

Perhaps it was not as big a concern as Sozin believed. At least, not so big that the situation currently required the Avatar’s intervention.

He decided.

“I’m sorry,” he told Ta Min, though it pained him to deny Sozin—or her—anything. “I can’t.”

She turned away from the sight of the passing winged lemurs and met his eyes without a trace of the playfulness they had shared earlier. “May I ask why?”

Roku considered how much of his reasoning to share, aware that Ta Min would report everything to Sozin. It was the first time he’d ever worried about holding anything back from his friend, implicitly understanding that things were more complicated now.

In the end, he simply told her, “I need to focus on my training at the moment.”

She turned away. “I understand.”

“But we’ll keep a close eye on the Earth Kingdom,” he added. “If their actions toward our people or our land grow more aggressive, I’ll step in.”

“Prince Sozin will be glad to hear the Fire Nation has your support.”

They began to follow the walking path back up toward the garden’s entrance.

“I wish I could give you a better message to take back,” Roku said. “I know Sozin’s going to be unhappy.”

She shrugged. Readjusted one of her golden hair sticks. “It’s good practice.”

“For what?”

“Being a diplomat,” Ta Min said. “That’s what I want to do with my education. Prince Sozin promised to let me begin apprenticing as one after I delivered this message to you.”

“Ah, and if the future Fire Lord deems it a fitting profession for you, who are your parents to disagree?”

Ta Min smiled, the playfulness returning. “Exactly.”

As they walked, the sides of their shoulders pressed together. Neither moved away.

“I’m glad he chose you to bring this message,” Roku said.

“Me too,” Ta Min said.

“Since you came all this way, perhaps you’ll stay for a few days? The food isn’t anything to write home about—especially the tea—but the Air Nomads are gracious hosts, and the views are spectacular.”

Ta Min took in the surrounding mountains that rose above the clouds like a constellation of wise old guardian spirits. “I’d like that.”

“Oh, and the library,” Roku added, even though she’d already agreed to stay. “They have so many scrolls I’ve never seen in any Fire Nation collection before. You’ll love it.”

“I always suspected you were secretly a scroll worm,” Ta Min said, amused by his boyish excitement over the library. “Even if you did spend most of your free time shirtless in the Royal Courtyard sparring with Prince Sozin.”

“Oh, so you noticed.” Roku raised his arms and flexed.

Ta Min rolled her eyes. “I just need to compose a quick message to Sozin before you show me around.”

“Not worried about the hawk getting intercepted?”

“I’ll keep it cryptic.”

Roku nodded. “Tell him that I shaved my head, and it’s as beautiful as a dragon egg.”

“I’m not going to tell him that,” Ta Min said before she walked away.

She was only just out of sight when Sister Disha appeared on one of the garden’s other walking paths. The petite Air Nun strolled up to Roku, hands clasped behind her back, the barest of smiles playing across her lips.

“Your friend will make a formidable diplomat someday.”

Roku’s cheeks reddened. “How much of that did you hear?”

“Enough.”

“Some secret airbending eavesdropping technique?”

“Something like that.” She nodded in the direction from which she’d come. “My favorite spot to meditate is over by the rhododendrons around the corner. They’re lovely this time of year.”

“Did I make the right decision?” Roku asked.

“It was wise not to involve yourself in a minor territorial dispute between nations. Even if the request came from a close friend.”

He grinned. “Does that mean I’m ready to learn airbending?”

“Nearly. But in your final assurance to the young lady, you referred to ‘our people’ and ‘our land’ when speaking of the Fire Nation.”

Roku’s smile fell. He couldn’t deny what that implied.

Out of nowhere, a pie fell from the sky. It struck the head of an Airbender statue several feet away from Roku and Sister Disha, splattering them with stray fragments of crust and fruit filling.

Roku sighed as he brushed off his robes. “Can you please tell Gyatso to stop trying to hit me with pies?”

Sister Disha shrugged. “It’s harmless airbending practice.” She stepped over to the statue, dipped a finger into the filling dripping down the side of the statue’s face, and tasted it. “Mmm . . . candied jackfruit,” she informed Roku. Then she cupped her hands around her mouth and called up the mountain, “Your aim needs work, but your recipe is coming along!”

A CLEVER TURN OF PHRASE

By the end of the week, Roku couldn't help but feel as if Ta Min had been at the temple for years instead of days. Even though she was a guest, she joined the Air Nomads in their meditation sessions, prayers, and chores. She shared their vegetarian meals—and genuinely seemed to enjoy the food. She played with the children during the day and held long conversations with Sister Disha, Abbot Rabten, and the other elders in the evenings, learning more about Air Nomad culture in a few days than Roku had learned in months. She even took to wearing their robes when Sister Disha—whose opinion of the visit shifted the better she got to know Ta Min—gifted her with a set.

As the end of Ta Min's stay neared, Sister Disha even agreed to let them fly Amra down to the base of the mountain. The Air Nun's only stipulation was that they had to take Gyatso—who she'd kept trying to force Roku to spend time with for some reason. Thankfully, after they landed, the boy said he'd prefer to stay behind with Amra, so Roku and Ta Min went ahead to the village by themselves.

"I think Sister Disha is ready to grant you your arrows," he told her as they strolled along the path, which cut through dense forest. It was a perfect late-summer day, the air crisp and warm with a hint of autumn. Buttery yellow leaves fluttered overhead as dappled sunlight carpeted the trail.

Ta Min laughed. Roku missed her already.

Tomorrow, she would return to the Fire Nation, and Roku would set out with the Air Nomads for another season of relief missions. They'd both have to spend the rest of the day preparing for their travels, so this quick trip to the nearby village for provisions would be their last chunk of time alone together. Roku had spent the morning anguishing over whether to confess his true feelings to Ta Min and was leaning toward doing so if the right moment presented itself. Maybe this was it.

"Seriously, though," Roku continued, "I envy the way you seem so at home here. How do you do it? How do you adjust so easily?"

She shrugged. “I like people. And if I want to be a great diplomat, I need to learn as much as I can about different cultures. Maybe it’s similar to being the Avatar in that regard—minus all the bending, of course.”

Roku nodded. “You might be onto something. Sister Disha keeps telling me I’m a ‘spirit of no nation.’ I’ve been trying to figure out what that means by reading about my past lives, but maybe I just need to learn more about the world.”

“Hmm. A ‘spirit of no nation.’ A clever turn of phrase, but I don’t think it’s quite right.”

Roku gave Ta Min a crooked smile. “You disagree about the nature of the Avatar with the person selected by the Air Nomad Council of Elders to train the Avatar?”

“Is that not allowed?”

“Tell me more.”

“The Avatar is reborn into a different nation according to the cycle of the seasons. So, it seems to me that spending time as part of each nation is integral to being the Avatar. Maybe it’s necessary to care deeply about your homeland so that you can empathize with how others feel about theirs. Once you fully understand that each is as valuable—and as flawed—as the others, that could motivate you to strive for peace and balance between the Four Nations.” She thought for a moment. “Maybe it’s less about being a spirit of *no* nation, and more about being a spirit of *all* nations.”

Roku regarded her, thoroughly impressed. “You’re going to be a great diplomat.”

Ta Min brushed a strand of hair behind her ear and smiled. “Thank you.”

“But I’ll keep your criticism of Sister Disha’s core beliefs to myself, lest you lose her favor.”

“My hero, the Avatar,” Ta Min said, clutching her hands together in front of her heart.

As they fell into a comfortable silence, Roku continued to consider Ta Min’s perspective, admiring the way her mind worked and wishing they had more time. More time to stroll through the temple’s gardens, to make terrible sand art, to read aloud to each other in the library, to care for the buoyant Air Nomad toddlers together, to guess the animal the other was trying to create out of firebending, to simply *be* together. Even if they

couldn't do any of those things, Roku would be content to spend his days sweeping and cleaning and dusting and doing whatever other mundane tasks the Air Nomads needed so long as Ta Min was nearby.

That was what he longed for. Not the Avatarhood.

Roku was so lost in his head thinking about all that he'd miss about Ta Min that he didn't hear or feel the earth shift as the ground opened up beneath them. Roku and Ta Min cried out in surprise as they plummeted straight down and slammed into hardpacked dirt.

They helped each other up and found that they had fallen into a narrow pit a dozen feet or so deep. A small patch of leaves and sky was visible through the opening above. Had they really fallen into some overlooked chasm in the ground, or—

A sneering face appeared above—a rough-looking man Roku had never seen before, with a raggedy brown beard and the kind of floppy hat that was fashionable among Earth Kingdom criminals.

“Earth King Jialun sends his regards, Avatar,” the man said with a gravelly voice, then tipped his floppy hat and swept his arm over the pit's opening.

Roku and Ta Min shot simultaneous blasts of fire upward, but their flames were extinguished as the walls closed in, burying them within the earth.

A QUICK END TO THE ERA OF ROKU

Soil and rock pressed into Roku from all sides. He was encased, crushed, unable to move any part of his body despite his welling anger and panic. There was no hope of digging or firebending his way out.

His pulse raced. His breathing grew quick and shallow. His mind reeled.

Was Ta Min okay? He needed to help her. He needed to get out. But how? Could he enter the Avatar State?

He focused.

He could not.

Had he really been ambushed by a sole Earth Kingdom criminal? Some Avatar he was. If they ever updated *The Lives of the Avatar*, Roku was certain his entry was going to be no more than a couple lines.

But what could he do?

He remembered the sonorous voice of Sister Disha: *Breathe*.

Obviously, Roku thought.

Breathe.

Fine.

Roku stopped struggling. Instead, he focused on slowing his breathing.

As best as he could while being crushed to death, he inhaled, counted to four, exhaled, counted to four again.

Roku repeated the basic breathing exercise several times. Soon enough, his heart rate slowed, his mind calmed, his body relaxed. He wasn't confident this was about to help him escape, but at least he wouldn't die panicking. Maybe that was good for his reincarnation.

Roku was about to take another breath when he felt the soil around him begin to shift. The pressure loosened, lightened—then darkness gave way to sunlight. Something pulled Roku upward until he burst through the ground like he'd been spit up onto the surface. Weakened by the crushing pressure of having been nearly buried alive, he fell onto all fours, coughing and spitting out dirt. He checked his left where Ta Min had been walking—thankfully, she was there. In a similar condition, but there.

He couldn't believe it—he had actually done it. He had used earthbending to save them.

Maybe he wouldn't be such a failure of an Avatar after all.

"You're welcome," came Gyatso's smarmy voice. The Air Nomad slipped past Roku to help Ta Min to her feet. "I came as fast as I could the moment I heard all that rumbling."

As Roku stood with some effort, he noticed the raggedy-bearded Earthbender that had attacked them was lying crumpled at the base of a nearby tree, unconscious. Okay. Maybe Roku had not performed some wondrous feat.

Ta Min rushed over and embraced Roku, and he tried not to wince at a sharp pain in his side. A cracked rib, perhaps. They pulled apart and looked each over with concern, then relief. They were bruised and scratched and covered in dirt, but neither seemed seriously injured. Knowing Ta Min was safe lessened some of Roku's frustration at having been so easily ambushed—and some of his shame at the realization that the young, sleepy-eyed Air Nomad had been the one to save them.

Roku turned to Gyatso. "How'd you do it?"

"My airbending worked," Gyatso said, astonished. "It worked when I leapt off Amra to sail down here on my glider. It worked when I swung my staff to knock the Earthbender back with a blast of air. And it worked when I injected a whorl of wind through the soil to lift you both out."

Roku nodded, pretending not to be impressed at Gyatso's abilities.

"Thank you," Ta Min said and hugged Gyatso.

"So you're fixed?" Roku asked.

Gyatso thrust an open palm out to the side. Nothing happened. His face fell. "Guess not."

"Maybe seeing us in danger focused your chi," Ta Min suggested.

"Maybe."

"I'm just glad Sister Disha insisted you come with us," Roku admitted.

The corner of Gyatso's mouth lifted. Then he nodded in the direction of the unconscious Earthbender. "Is that guy an assassin or something?"

Earth King Jialun sends his regards, the man had said.

Roku surveyed the area. Just off the path, he spotted a mound of fresh dirt ringing a hole in the ground—a burrow wide enough for a man to fit

through. “Looks like it,” he said, nodding in its direction. “He must have tunneled his way to us.”

Then he strode over to the Earthbender, anger arriving now that the threat had passed. He grabbed the man by his collar and yanked him up into a sitting position. The man moaned and started to stir as he leaned back against the tree.

Roku backed up then whipped around with a spinning hook kick that unleashed a swath of flames that scorched the tree trunk a few inches above the Earthbender’s head. The man’s eyes shot wide open, filled with panic at the realization that he had failed his mission and was now himself the one in danger.

He raised his hands to shield his face. “Don’t hurt me!”

“Hands at your side,” Roku threatened as curls of smoke rose from the burnt wood. The man lowered his hands. “And don’t even think of trying anything.”

“Cool down, Roku,” Gyatso said.

Roku glowered, focused on the Earthbender. “He tried to kill us.”

Ta Min stepped over to Roku’s side and touched his elbow. “But he’s no longer a threat.”

“The Earth King sent you?” Roku asked.

The Earthbender gulped, then nodded.

“Yeah, that makes him officially an assassin,” Gyatso said.

Roku was speechless. An assassin. Sent to end *his* life.

He scanned the dense surrounding forest, suddenly aware of all it could conceal. A sense of foreboding thrummed through his body. This was his future—murderers lying in wait behind every rock and tree. Everyone admired the power the Avatar possessed, but they rarely spoke of the target forever tattooed on his back—and on the backs of those he cared about most.

“But why?” Ta Min asked.

The Earthbender shrugged. “I’m an underling. Hired muscle. You think they’d tell me?”

Ta Min furrowed her brow. “But that doesn’t make any sense politically . . .”

Didn’t it, though? Roku took a deep breath and considered the situation. If King Jialun wanted to bring such a quick end to the Era of Roku, he *must*

be up to no good—just as Sozin had warned. He turned to Ta Min and opened his mouth to tell her as much when the Earthbender suddenly dove forward and burrowed straight into the ground.

Roku, Ta Min, and Gyatso snapped into defensive stances as they prepared for the assassin to resurface and attack. They focused on the muffled rumbling underfoot—but it rapidly grew more distant. Soon, the sound faded until there was only the wind through the trees.

“That’s not good,” Gyatso said, pointing out the obvious. Then he relaxed his stance and craned his neck upward at the shifting shafts of sunlight falling between the rustling leaves. “At least it’s a beautiful morning.”

Roku exhaled, then faced Ta Min, who looked up at him expectantly.

They had nearly lost their lives together—why wait to tell her how he felt?

Because now was not the time. She needed to focus on becoming a diplomat, and he needed to focus on becoming the Avatar. If they were meant to be, they’d find their way back to each other eventually.

Instead, he told her, “Write to Sozin again—I’ve changed my mind.”



“You’re not changing your mind,” Sister Disha said.

“But I’m the Avatar,” Roku whined. He uncrossed his arms since he was only one foot stamp away from being the petulant child the Air Nun clearly thought he was. Thankfully, Ta Min and Gyatso had decided to wait outside the sanctuary while he went in to speak with Sister Disha so were not there to witness his minor tantrum.

“And I am your airbending master,” she reminded him, tone more severe than usual. The statues of Roku’s numerous past lives stood in silent judgment around and above them, spiraling upward along the interior of the tower. “I determine when you are ready to learn airbending. I determine when you have mastered airbending. I determine when you are ready to begin serving. And you are *not* ready.”

Roku’s eyes drifted to the empty space next to Kyoshi’s imposing statue, the space where his own would someday go. “When will I be ready?”

“As I’ve told you many times before: when you detach from the Fire Nation.”

“This isn’t about the Fire Nation—this is about stopping the Earth Kingdom before they—”

“No,” Sister Disha said, interrupting Roku for the first time ever, as she continued to walk down the rows of statues. “This is a decision borne from anger, from the desire for revenge, to hurt those who attacked you and your friend.”

“They tried to kill us.”

“There will be countless attempts on your life. Are you to go to war every time?”

“It’s not war—it’s . . . a diplomatic mission. It’s persuading them to leave an island that doesn’t belong to them before things get worse.”

Sister Disha shook her head with disappointment. “Like the air, the land belongs to no one. It’s not the Avatar’s responsibility to enforce illusory boundaries.”

“‘Illusory boundaries’?” Roku repeated. “Tell that to the Earth monarchs or the Fire Lord or the Water chiefs.”

“That is for them to squabble about among themselves. As they always have, as they always will. Intervening in a territorial dispute that involves your homeland—especially before you are prepared—will only complicate their conflicts and cause the world to question your loyalties, no matter how the issue resolves.” Sister Disha stopped in front of a statue of Avatar Zalir toward the back of the sanctuary. She was a short-haired, athletically built woman in a sleeveless tunic and a patterned *tolgè*, a type of handwoven, wraparound skirt that was worn in the days before the Fire Nation when the archipelago was a loose collection of small clans scattered throughout the Fire Islands.

“But—”

“In the morning,” Sister Disha said, cutting Roku off for a second time as she now turned to face him, “we will leave for the South Pole, as planned, to assist the villages affected by the recent blizzard. Is that clear, Avatar Roku?”

“And if the Earth King sends another assassin?”

“You’ll hand him a shovel and ask him to help dig out the snow.”

Roku clenched his jaw. No argument he made would convince his airbending master. She was as unmoving, as unfeeling, as the stone sculptures that crowded the sanctuary. “Whatever you say, Sister.”

“Very good.” Sister Disha returned her attention to the statues. “Now, bathe, meditate, get some rest. You’ve had quite the eventful morning, and we have a long—and cold—journey ahead of us.”

Roku turned and left, storming down the rows of his past lives, through the empty space next to Kyoshi, and out of the Southern Air Temple’s inner sanctuary as a gust of air from within slammed the heavy doors shut behind him.

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TO THE REST OF US

Sneaking out of the Air Temple was as easy as Roku had hoped. No guards paced the darkened hallways, and the Air Nomads proved the deepest—but definitely not quietest—of sleepers. The greatest danger was making sure he didn't trip and fall down the mountain to his death as he descended the temple's spiraling open staircases and steep, twisting paths lit only by the full moon's soft, gray light. A flame would have helped, but he didn't want to risk it, lest the fire be spotted by some Air Monk randomly awake in the middle of the night.

After Roku crossed the narrow footbridge to the spur of the mountain where the sky bison slept in warmer seasons, he breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed shoulders he'd been tensing ever since he'd slipped out of his quarters. He strained his eyes to scan the sizeable outcropping but saw only the giant, furry pile of sleeping creatures.

Roku was less than thrilled about Gyatso joining him on this mission, but he had no other option for reaching a remote Fire Nation island in the middle of the sea unless he wanted the journey to take months instead of days. That was, assuming Lola, Gyatso's sky bison, cooperated.

At a young age, each Air Nomad bonded with a sky bison that would become their lifelong companion. As they learned to master airbending, they'd tame and train and deepen their relationships with their sky bison. It was said that the most strongly bonded pairs shared a spirit, sensing each other's emotions and anticipating each other's needs to such an extent that verbal and physical training cues became unnecessary.

Such was not the relationship between Gyatso and Lola. When Roku had first asked Gyatso about whether he could take Lola, the young Air Nomad admitted as much, explaining Lola had begun refusing even his most basic of commands around the same time his airbending started faltering. Still, he assured Roku that Lola would be able to make the journey. All Gyatso wanted in return was to go with him.

"Why?" Roku had asked.

“My airbending hasn’t been that powerful in a long time,” Gyatso had said, referring to the rescue. “You’re bound to get into more trouble on this trip, so I’ll have more opportunities to tap into that energy to save you. If I do that enough times, maybe I’ll be able to figure out how to fully reestablish my connection to my airbending.”

Roku wasn’t sure that would work, but maybe it wouldn’t matter. This mission might never even get off the ground. Gyatso’s assurance that Lola would suddenly obey him again might prove to have been nothing more than the empty promise of someone who had just experienced a burst of overconfidence following an unexpected victory.

“Oh my spirits, is that the *Avatar*?” Gyatso called out in a high-pitched voice as he stomped across the footbridge. Then, in a stage-whisper to Ta Min, who was walking alongside him, “He’s shorter than I expected.”

“And all that hair,” Ta Min said, playing along. “Ugh.”

“Ha. Ha,” Roku said.

Ta Min hugged Roku when she reached him, their near-death experience having eroded both their senses of Fire Nation propriety when around each other. “We’re just kidding.”

“I wasn’t,” Gyatso said.

Roku ignored him. “You sure I can’t convince you to come with us, Ta Min?”

Ta Min nodded, regretful. “Two Fire Nationals might give the Earth Kingdom the impression this is more Fire Nation business than Avatar business. Besides, my deal with Prince Sozin was simply to deliver his message and return your response. He might not like it if I decided to involve myself directly in the matter.”

“You sound like you’re afraid of him.”

“He may be your closest friend,” Ta Min explained, “but to the rest of us, he’s the future Fire Lord.”

“Fair enough,” Roku said as if he understood the difference. Then he turned to Gyatso. “So, which one is Lola?”

“That one,” he said, pointing with his staff at a medium-sized sky bison sleeping at the far edge of the pile. He lowered his staff and whistled through his fingers quietly. “Lola! Wake up!”

The sky bison rolled so she was facing away from them, her six paws lolling from one side to the other as she did so.

“Come here, girl!”

The sky bison stirred no more.

Roku raised an eyebrow at Gyatso.

Gyatso shrugged. “She always takes a few minutes to wake up. In the meantime, help me with the saddle.”

They set down their satchels and bedrolls and made their way over to the storage area carved into the side of the mountain. The vast saddles were stacked neatly by size, having recently been cleaned and oiled and organized ahead of tomorrow’s planned departures. Still, no amount of cleaning would rid them of the odor accumulated from years of sweat and musky bison fur.

“I don’t suppose we can do this the easy way?” Roku asked, having seen how the Air Nomads typically used a burst of air to float the heavy saddles onto the beasts.

Gyatso swung his arms around in a circular motion, stirring up a small spiral of wind. He pushed it forward, and the spinning air slipped under a saddle. The saddle trembled as it rose a few inches—then dropped with a soft thump. Gyatso frowned.

“It’s okay,” Ta Min reassured him.

But was it? Roku was about to take this kid along on his very first mission as the Avatar. Where was the skilled Airbender who’d snapped into action to save him and Ta Min just yesterday?

With nothing but their own muscles—and Ta Min’s—they lifted a saddle off the stack and carried it over to Lola. It was as heavy as a boulder, and all were relieved to set it down when they neared the sleeping sky bison.

“We just put it on top of her?” Roku asked, shaking out his hands.

“Sure,” Gyatso said.

Ta Min stretched her arms. “We should wake her up first, right?”

“Hmm. I don’t think she’d like that.”

Roku cocked his head. “You think she’d prefer it if we just dropped a heavy weight on top of her while she’s unconscious?”

“You have a point,” Gyatso said and was quiet for a few moments as he thought. “We could ride bareback.”

“I’m not riding bareback.” Roku went over to his pack and returned a moment later with an armful of pears, having prepared for this scenario.

“Lola,” he called in a quiet sing-song. “Wake up, Lola. I have treaty treats for you.”

As he approached, Lola caught the scent of the fruit, and her broad nose began to twitch. Eyes still closed, she rolled onto her stomachs and slowly opened her cavernous mouth. Roku tossed in a few pears, almost losing a finger when her teeth snapped closed.

Gyatso took a wary step forward and patted her side as she chewed. “We need you to take us somewhere, Lola.”

Lola swallowed, then opened her mouth again. Roku hefted in a few more pears. “Somewhere far away.”

The sky bison continued chewing, ruminating on the request. Finally, her eyelids slid open. Her gaze went straight to the remaining fruit in Roku’s arms.

“There will be plenty of fruit where we’re going,” he reassured her.

Lola finished eating the pears, yawned, and stretched out her six limbs. Then she sat up.

Roku turned to Gyatso with a smug smile.

“That was bribery,” Gyatso said.

Roku and Ta Min laughed.

After they hoisted the saddle onto Lola, Gyatso secured it to the sky bison by braiding strands of her fur through the eyelets that lined the inside of the saddle’s skirt. Roku tugged on the saddle to check the Air Nomad’s work, then strapped their equipment to the back. Gyatso made an excuse to go to the other side of the sky bison, leaving Roku and Ta Min alone to say their goodbyes.

“I’m glad I was able to see you again,” Ta Min said, then wrapped her arms around Roku. “And that we finally got the chance to really get to know each other.”

“I am too,” Roku said, trying to commit this moment to memory. “I only wish I had the nerve to speak to you back home.”

They pulled apart. “The past is the past. We have the future.”

“I hope so.” Roku rubbed the back of his neck. “And sorry for almost getting us killed.”

“It happens.” Ta Min winked. “But make sure it never gets closer than ‘almost.’”

“So, you really aren’t going to change your mind and come with us?”

“Maybe next time.”

Roku sighed. Nodded.

“Are you two done yet?” Gyatso called from the other side of Lola.

Roku hugged Ta Min once more, then called over, “Let’s go.”

Gyatso came around and said goodbye to Ta Min, then he and Roku helped each other mount Lola’s saddle.

“You have Prince Sozin’s map?” Ta Min asked from below as Lola stood.

Roku patted his satchel.

“Want me to go over how to read it one more time?”

“No need.” Roku tapped his head. “My mind is like an armadillo-bear trap.”

Ta Min laughed, backing away to give Lola space for takeoff. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Not soon enough,” Roku said.

“Gross,” Gyatso said, then took the reins and called, “Yip-yip!”

Lola flapped her tail and burst off the ground and into the air, carrying Roku and Gyatso away from Ta Min, away from Sister Disha, away from the Southern Air Temple, and into the moon-bright night sky.

ASH IN THE AIR

Prince Sozin smiled as he decoded Ta Min's latest message.

He had been surprised—and disappointed—by Roku's initial refusal when her first missive arrived a few days ago. Sozin had felt certain his friend would never say no to him, let alone to Ta Min. The Avatar title and airbending training must already be going to Roku's head.

At least everything was now back on track. After Roku dealt with the Earth Kingdom, Sozin would swoop back in and find someone who could train him to enhance his firebending strength a thousandfold.

Sozin burned the scroll, then turned back to Kozaru, flipping her a few silver pieces. "For your Earthbender associate."

Kozaru caught the silver and then examined the pieces in her open palm and frowned. "It's less than you promised him."

Sozin sneered. "It was a sloppy job."

He had instructed Kozaru to tell her friend to scare the Avatar, not nearly kill him. And the "assassination" attempt wasn't supposed to involve anyone else. If something had happened to Ta Min—who had no idea she was but a pawn in his plans—Sozin would have felt terrible.

Kozaru nodded and pocketed the silver, but then lingered.

"Is there something else?" Sozin asked.

"Another message . . . from the Fire Lord."

Sozin gestured for Kozaru to hand it over. She did and then left.

Sozin went to the window. His rented room was above the cantina, overlooking the natural spring that gave the sad cluster of boxy adobe dwellings its name—Misty Palms Oasis. The air was hot and dry, the sky an unmarred blue. Beyond the village's shabby fortifications and smattering of greenery, the rolling, golden dunes of the Si Wong Desert stretched out to the northern and eastern horizons. This place was a traveler's last chance to gather supplies and rest before setting out into the sandy expanse. Which is exactly what he planned to do in the morning.

Sozin had always wanted to visit Wan Shi Tong's library. It was supposed to stand somewhere in the middle of this very desert and was rumored to be the greatest collection of texts known to man or spirit. He was certain that within its walls, he could learn more than he ever could from any library back home—even more than from the restricted scrolls in the Dragonbone Catacombs.

Fire Lord Taiso had flat-out rejected Sozin's previous request to search for the library, dismissing the place as nothing but fiction. But the recent hitch in Sozin's plans had presented the perfect opportunity. Sozin was already out of his father's reach and had to kill time until Roku dealt with the Earthbenders. He'd find the library, learn as much as he could, then return to the island after receiving word that those dirt-throwing dogs had left.

Sozin sighed, unrolled the message from his father, and read. Unsurprisingly, it didn't say anything new.

You're wasting your time, blah blah blah. Come home before you embarrass the family, blah blah blah. Think of your reputation, your honor, blah blah blah. The future of the Fire Nation, blah blah blah.

Sozin lit the message scroll on fire and tossed it out the window. It fluttered downward aflame, his father's words burning to ash in the air.

KNOWLEDGE TO DESTROY

Malaya waited as Baku used his firebending to heat the short strip of metal by pressing it between his palms. When the steel's glow shifted from orange to yellow, the stocky blacksmith with a long-braided beard and wild hair offered it to the young woman. She took it with the tongs, moved it over to the anvil, and began hammering. Malaya worked with a steady, single-minded focus, keeping the rhythm Baku had taught her. Each strike rang out through the dense fog that enshrouded the village, the terraced valley, and the entire island.

She ignored the growing exhaustion in her arms and the sweat dripping down her forehead. After forming the dagger's point, she flattened the edges to shape equal bevels on both sides. Each chiming strike of metal against metal brought a measure more of definition. Soon, it was ready. She paused for the first time since she began and looked up at Baku. He examined the teardrop-shaped blade she'd forged—and nodded with approval.

She held the dagger up with the tongs, and he took it back with his bare hands and eyed its edges. "Much better than the last one."

Malaya set down the tools and dragged her forearm across her forehead to wipe away the sweat. "Thank you, Tatang Baku."

He pressed the blade between his palms again to heat it back up. "I wish the others cared enough to learn how to craft their own blades. Instead, they simply order me about, impatient and unappreciative. Even . . ." Baku trailed off. "Well, you know who I was going to say."

Malaya did know, but neither of them were foolish enough to name the chief aloud. Thanks to the ever-present mist, you never knew when someone might be listening nearby, eager to reap the reward for reporting dissent. "It's important to know how to do things for oneself," she said simply.

"Spoken like a true scout."

"Maybe," Malaya said. Though, her approach was borne more out of necessity than out of natural inclination. With parents like hers, she'd

always had to learn anything she could to help her fend for herself.

From the best gatherers, she learned which plants were edible and poisonous and curative. From the best hunters, she learned to make weapons and traps, to track and capture and kill, to gut and skin and roast. From the fishermen, she learned to pull life from the river and streams. From the farmers, she learned to read the weather through the fog and the seasons by the stars. From the weavers, she learned to transform plant fibers into rope and cloth. From the benders, she learned about the qualities—and limitations—of each element.

Therefore, nobody was surprised when the clan's chief, Ulo, had returned from the Sacred Cave after the autumnal equinox ritual several years ago and announced that Yungib had selected her to serve as one of the clan's scouts. The job would involve harnessing all she'd learned to survive alone in the wild for long stretches of time as she traveled the perimeter of the island searching for evidence of outsiders. It was a highly respected role within the clan, but it was not highly desired given the isolation it demanded. That isolation suited Malaya well, however. The handful of days she spent in the village every few weeks to repair her weapons and tools, restock her provisions, and report back to Ulo were more social interaction than she required.

The freshly formed blade hissed as Baku dipped it into a stone trough of water. "This will take a while," he said. He'd have to rapidly heat and cool the steel several times until it hardened properly. "Take care of your other business, say hi to your family, then come back. I'm guessing you'll want to wrap the handle in rattan yourself?"

Malaya nodded.

"I thought so. Go on, then. And make sure you find Kamao." He winked.

Malaya thanked Baku and left the workshop that was next to his family's nipa hut, which stood on stilts like all the others. She had no intention of seeking out Kamao, though. She liked the blacksmith well enough, but his son was an utter fool.

Instead, she slipped through the mist and saw only those she needed to see. Most of the Waterbenders were in the Sacred Cave, but she found the healer who helped restore the sprained ankle Malaya had been walking on for days. Then she found one of the Earthbenders to advise her on locating

more of the black-red ore their clan used to forge steel. One of the cooks showed her how to make mudfish stew. One of the weavers helped her better modify her tolge skirt so it wouldn't restrict her movements as much and then gifted her with a new short, sleeveless black tunic. The village's best hunter, a woman named Mamamaril, gave Malaya a few tips for improving her bow and spear techniques and some insight into why one of her traps might keep coming up empty. And one of the gatherers demonstrated how to extract poison from a rare basilisk-centipede and crimson ink from sea snails.

She had no desire to endure her parents' nagging questions about when she planned to marry, so she walked past their place and made her way to the thatch-roofed structure that was perched on stilts at the highest point in the small village. In the open area under the hut, native cow-pigs and pig-chickens rummaged for scraps around a firepit where one of Ulo's daughters was coaxing a spark to life. "He's teaching," the girl told Malaya without looking up.

Malaya nodded, slipped her bow off her shoulder, and leaned back against the bamboo ladder that led to the hut's entrance. She looked out into the dense gray-white mist as she listened to Ulo's resonant voice drifting through the bamboo slats overhead. He was talking story, probably to a group of little ones sitting at his feet.

She had heard this one before—the tale of the Baybayin clan. They were a peaceful, mixed community—like their own—that had existed on the other side of their island centuries ago. One day, a group of soldiers in blood-red armor sailed to their shores. The soldiers declared the island territory of their clan and demanded that every family without any Firebenders leave immediately, never to return. When the Baybayin clan resisted, the soldiers burned the community to ash.

Malaya had always wondered how much of the story—any of Ulo's stories, in fact—were true. When she was a little one, she had noticed details shift from one retelling to the next. A name. A place. A sequence of events. And so on. The first time she pointed it out, he'd cracked her across the knuckles with a bamboo rod. The next time, she instead asked her parents about an inconsistency she'd caught—and they'd forced her to kneel on raw grains of rice for hours.

Therefore, she'd learned at a young age that to question the stories was to question Ulo. To question Ulo was to question Yungib. To question

Yungib was to invite their people's destruction.

"The Baybayin clan is why," came Ulo's familiar deep, smooth voice as he concluded the tale overhead, "we must always make the proper sacrifices and offerings to Yungib each equinox. If not for Yungib, our ancestors might also have perished long ago."

There was shuffling above, and then the little kids began to file out of the hut, talking excitedly about the story as they descended the ladder and darted off to play instead of returning to help pick pests off the rice stalks as they were supposed to. Malaya's two little brothers ran past without so much as a glance, and that was fine by her. Both were born after she had become a scout, so she had only ever been a passing presence in their lives.

When the last child disappeared into the fog, Malaya climbed the ladder.

Animal skulls, spears, hatchets, and other weaponry lined the walls. Bales of rice rested in the rafters. Smoke and heat rose through the cracks in the split bamboo floorboards from the cooking fire below.

Ulo was sitting on a rattan mat against the back wall of the single-room space. He had one leg out and the other pulled up, elbow casually resting on the raised knee. Though his long hair and beard had gone white years ago, his icy blue eyes were still sharp, and his dark brown body was still corded with muscle.

Ulo offered his hand. Malaya stepped forward and pressed the back of it to her forehead. He gestured for her to sit. She sat.

"Tea?" he asked.

Malaya nodded even though she didn't like tea.

He picked up a cup and, with his other hand, traced practiced motions through the air. A stream of steaming liquid snaked out of the pot sitting on coals in the corner and filled the cup. He swirled his finger to stir its contents, then passed the cup to Malaya.

She thanked him, took the tea, and breathed it in. Moon-blooming sampaguita. She sometimes crushed the small, white flowers—which only bloomed at night during a full moon—into a fine powder, which could be fed to a trapped animal to dull its senses for a kinder kill.

"You've returned early," Ulo said. "I assume the news is not good."

Malaya took a centering breath. "I'm afraid not."

Since the thick fog and shifting rocky coastlines discouraged most ships from approaching, scouts rarely reported evidence of outsiders on the

island. When they did, Ulo's instructions were always same: Keep a close eye on them and report back if there was reason to be concerned. But there rarely was. The outsiders always lingered for a few days, venturing only short distances from where they landed, before packing up and leaving.

That's what she'd always heard, at least. The small group of Earthbenders that Malaya had stumbled upon nearly two moons ago were the first she'd encountered since she'd been a scout.

She had found their camp at Itak Cove in the northeast. Heart racing, she had dismounted Kilat, her gorilla-tarsier, and approached by foot from the trees. She got close enough to hear and see with senses sharpened by a lifetime in fog—but not so close that their dull eyes or ears might catch movement in the jungle that hugged the beach.

She had counted six. They wore the symbols and green shades of the Earth Kingdom, which Malaya recognized from Ulo's stories. The youngest was around her age, the oldest around Baku's. All were Earthbenders. Four were built like soldiers and wore helmets and shell-plated armor. The remaining two wore simple clothing and spent most of their time gazing at the plants and terrain. By eavesdropping, she learned that there had also been two more in their party but that they'd vanished without a trace one night.

After the Earthbenders had settled into their earthen shelters that evening, Malaya hopped on Kilat and rushed back to the village. When she reported her observations to Ulo, the old chief's face grew grave, and he gave her the expected command to keep a close eye on them.

So she had. The four armored Earthbenders spent most of their time taking turns guarding the camp, sparring, attempting to fish, or complaining about the fog and the foods from home they missed. It took them forever to start fires, they were afraid to eat the fruit they found, and they rarely cleaned anything, even themselves. Their earthbending was blunt and forceful, often used in service of idle competitions. They were a far cry from the rapacious beasts Ulo had always painted them in his stories of the outsiders.

It was the other two—a mother and daughter, it turned out—who had captured Malaya's interest. They closely examined nearly every plant and rock and animal and insect they came across, using delicate earthbending to lift burrowing crabs from the sand, trap beetles, split stones. They sketched drawings and took notes. They wondered aloud and discussed.

Soon, they had begun to venture away from the beach. Two guards would always accompany them, and they would never go too far—hindered as they were by the combination of dense fog, thick vegetation, and unfamiliar mountainous terrain—always returning to camp by nightfall. And as the mother and daughter overflowed with the excitement of their discoveries, Malaya reexperienced her home through the outsiders' eyes, learning that many of the creatures and plants she took for granted did not exist anywhere else in the world.

The first night they saw the shifting constellations of the firefly-starlings flickering in the sky overhead, Malaya's eyes welled with tears at their wonder. The first time they picked up a dragon paw fruit, Malaya longed to show them how best to crack its spiky crimson shell. And the day they first spotted a gorilla-tarsier clinging to a tree overhead, Malaya had to cover her mouth to stop herself from laughing out loud at their shocked delight.

Which was why she hadn't understood Ulo's anger when she reported all this back to him as evidence of their harmlessness.

"You do not understand the outsiders as I do," Ulo had said sternly. "They only seek knowledge to destroy."

His condescending tone irritated Malaya, but she held her tongue for the sake of self-preservation. As chief, he was the only clan member allowed to leave the island. A privilege he lorded over everyone in a thousand small ways.

But maybe he didn't know everything. Perhaps some wielded knowledge as a weapon, but maybe there were others—those like this mother and daughter—whose curiosity was pure. They wanted to know more about the world because they loved the world.

"Watch them carefully," he had cautioned, sensing the reemergence of a skepticism he thought he had stamped out years ago. "For the sake of Yungib."

So, she did as she was told. But this time, she had something else to report. Something else that she could not offer to the chief as evidence of harmlessness.

Malaya cleared her throat. "They've moved their camp."

"Is that so?" Ulo said evenly. "Along the coast?"

She shook her head. "Inland."

“Should we be concerned?” he asked, though it was less a question and more a test.

“Yes,” Malaya said, then took her first sip of tea. “They’re moving slowly, but if they make it far enough west, they’ll find the path.”

Ulo was quiet for a long time. The path led up the mountains, along the ridge, and down into the valley. If the outsiders stumbled upon it, it was only a matter of time before they followed it to the village—and the Sacred Cave beyond.

“Have they sent out any messenger hawks?” Ulo asked.

“No.”

“That’s good news, at least. If they try, you know what to do.”

Malaya nodded. She was the best shot the clan had seen in generations and wouldn’t have trouble hitting a large hawk.

“Can you get them to turn around before the equinox?”

Malaya hesitated. She didn’t have a plan, and the autumnal equinox—when Ulo would next meet with Yungib—was fast approaching. “I think so.”

Ulo sighed with disappointment. “You don’t sound so sure. Perhaps Amihan would be better suited to the task.”

Amihan was the village’s veteran scout, a middle-aged Airbender with blue eyes like Ulo and a twisted sense of humor that might have been the product of too much time alone over the years. Once, Malaya had gone to relieve Amihan and found her surrounded by the splattered corpses of toads on which she’d been practicing her airbending. “I wanted to see how high I could send them,” Amihan had told her without blinking.

“That won’t be necessary,” Malaya told Ulo, eager to prove her usefulness.

“We’ll see.” Ulo’s lips curled into a humorless smile. “You are not growing too attached to these outsiders, are you?”

She shook her head.

“Good. They are not like us. When they find something they deem valuable, they do not protect it. They steal and exploit and horde it. They strip forests, poison waterways, and gut mountains. They do not stop until they have gathered as much of that thing as they can, leaving behind only destruction.” Ulo took a deep breath and leaned back. “In my time as chief, more and more outsiders have been reaching our shores. It is more

important than ever that we are ready to give our lives to protect Yungib.
Are you prepared to do that, Malaya?"

"I am," she said. It was the only thing to say.

"I hope so." Ulo waved his hand to dismiss her.

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A LOVELY, MEANDERING TOUR

“Okay,” Roku announced, looking up from the map, “I think I’ve figured it out.”

It was a balmy, gray morning. Low waves lapped at the black sand of the random beach where they’d spent the night after yet another day of failing to find Sozin’s fog-shrouded island. Lola was still snoring softly on the opposite side of the crackling campfire from Roku. Gyatso was crouching near the water, shaving his head.

The young Air Nomad finished running the razor over the last portion of his scalp and then rinsed the blade. “You’ve said that several times a day ever since we left the temple.”

“But now I’ve really got it.”

Gyatso tried to dry the razor with his airbending. Failing, he wiped it across his robes, then walked over and offered it to Roku. “Want to use it?”

Roku stroked his facial hair. “No, thanks. I’m letting it grow in.”

“Not for those three scraggly whiskers you call a beard—for your hair.”

“You’re just jealous because your face is as smooth as a baby’s butt,” Roku said. “And for the last time, I’m not shaving my head.”

Gyatso wrinkled his nose. “Suit yourself.”

Roku angled the map toward Gyatso and pointed at a strange symbol. “Anyway, I think this is supposed to be Whaletail Island.” He slid his finger to another location. “And I think we’re here. If we head northwest, we should reach the foggy island by midday.”

Gyatso examined the inscrutable markings of Sozin’s coded chart for a few moments. “Or . . . we could go surf the elephant-koi and then head back to the temple before we get into too much trouble.”

Roku lowered the map. “But we’re so close.”

“Right. Definitely.” Gyatso smoothed a hand over his clean scalp, avoiding Roku’s eyes. “But say we’re not.”

Roku’s heart sank. Each time the sun had set with no sign of the island, he had wanted to give up too. But he was determined to be like Sozin and

ignore his self-doubt. “Your airbending isn’t fixed yet,” Roku tried.

“I’m not so sure spending several more days crisscrossing the open sea is going to help,” Gyatso said.

As if in agreement, Lola woke with a grumble and rolled over onto her stomachs. She stretched out her legs, stood, and shook herself off. Then she flew away to forage for breakfast in the treetops.

“You really think we’ll get in that much trouble?” Roku asked as the sky bison disappeared into the distance.

“Sister Disha isn’t going to be happy,” Gyatso said. “She might delay your airbending training for another year.”

Roku had already considered this possibility. But he was trying to convince himself that if he succeeded, she’d believe he was ready. “That’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

Gyatso stood in front of Roku and crossed his arms. “And what about me? My punishment might be worse.”

“Like what? Sky bison pen cleaning duty for a couple moons?”

Gyatso shook his head. “Try banishment.”

Roku looked at his companion. “You aren’t serious.”

There was no hint of the usual mischief on the Airbender’s face. “It happens.”

“Sure,” Roku said. He knew as much. Avatar Yangchen had been banished from the Northern Air Temple. “But only for the most serious offenses.”

Gyatso arched an eyebrow. “You mean like helping the Avatar disobey his airbending master by giving him a ride to some island where he makes a bunch of mistakes and plunges the Fire Nation and Earth Kingdom into war?”

Roku blinked. “I would have left even without you.”

Gyatso scoffed. “Sure.”

“And I’m not going to start a war.”

“It’s nice that you think that.”

“Please, Gyatso,” Roku said. “Give me one more day. If we don’t find the island by nightfall, we can return to the temple in the morning. I’ll even tell everyone that you had no choice, that I forced you to go with me.”

Gyatso took a deep breath and looked out over the low gray waves crashing under an endless sheet of gray clouds. “Fine.”



That night, Roku tossed and turned, unable to sleep, unable to keep his deep sense of failure and shame at bay. The day's search had proved as fruitless as the others, so they'd be heading back south in the morning to face the consequences of their unauthorized—and pointless—adventure.

The campfire had burned out a while ago, so there was only the sound of Lola's gentle snoring and the sea's sloshing rhythm. Above, the sky was clear and bursting with stars.

Eventually, Roku heard Gyatso stir—but Roku didn't give any indication he was also awake. He simply listened as the Airbender stood up and walked away, padding softly across the sand. Curious, Roku got up a few moments later and quietly followed.

Gyatso stopped when he reached the top of the bluffs that overlooked their camp. He stood still for a long time with his fists pressed together, breathing deeply as the warm evening air stirred the tall seagrass that grew in clumps all around him. Then, he dropped into a wide stance, raised his hands with palms open, and began moving through airbending forms.

Roku had seen enough airbending training during his time among the Air Nomads to know that Gyatso's spiraling foot-work, arcing strikes, and wheeling kicks were better than most. He flowed fluidly between each stance, each movement, each turn and spin. It was as if he was dancing with the wind itself. He was more graceful than most of the Airbenders twice his age who'd already earned their arrows—it was no wonder Sister Disha had taken a special interest in helping him.

Yet Gyatso only produced the expected blasts of air a fraction of the time. And even then, the gusts were sputtering and weak, like a small child attempting to blow out a candle. The longer he went on, the angrier and sloppier his motions became. Finally, he gave up altogether and sat down with a heavy sigh, dropping his face into his hands.

For the first time, Roku genuinely felt bad for Gyatso.

It was commonly understood that to master bending, one's spirit had to be attuned to the qualities of one's bending element. Firebenders had to stoke their determination, their will. Airbenders—from what Sister Disha had taught him so far—needed to relinquish their will and accept the openness of freedom.

Roku had trained for years until he mastered firebending. He didn't understand how he was expected to hold a contradictory ethos in his spirit to master another element—not to mention, go on to do that with two more elements.

So maybe it was his own struggles that drove him to step out from where he'd been watching and sit down next to Gyatso. "It'll come back to you," Roku said.

If Gyatso was surprised at the Avatar's sudden appearance—or sudden kindness—he didn't show it. He simply said, "I don't know if it will."

"I lost someone very close to me a few years ago," Roku offered. "It messed me up for a long time, but I found a way through it. You'll do the same."

Gyatso lifted his head. "Who did you lose?"

"My brother." Roku didn't know how much more to say. He rarely talked about Yasu, and he couldn't say what had compelled him to mention his brother now. The pain was still fresh, and he already felt a lump forming in his throat and tears welling in his eyes. "We were twins."

"I'm sorry," Gyatso said. Then, after a moment, he lowered his head. "I lost my sister last year."

Roku's understanding of Gyatso shifted—and he now knew why Sister Disha kept trying to get them to spend time together. "That's when you started having problems with your airbending."

Gyatso nodded.

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not really. Want to talk about your brother?"

"Not really."

Roku and Gyatso shared a small, sad laugh. They both knew what it was to lose a sibling, and so they both understood that revealing the existence of the wound was sometimes all the pain one could bear.

Gyatso cleared his throat. "You said you found a way through it?"

Roku nodded. "A good friend."

"Sozin?"

Roku nodded again.

"So what's the Prince of the Fire Nation really like?" Gyatso asked.

Roku considered the best way to answer the question. "One time, when we were little—maybe seven or eight—all three of us were playing in the

Royal Spa. Chasing, jumping, splashing. That kind of stuff. My brother accidentally splashed this big, muscular guy who was relaxing in one of the hot baths in the corner. The guy climbed out of the water, stormed over, and lifted my brother like he was about to body slam him.”

“What did you do?” Gyatso asked, enthralled.

“What was I going to do against this huge, fierce-looking Firebender who was probably ten or twenty years older than me? I froze. But Sozin ran up and—*boom*—hit the guy in the crotch with a fire fist. The guy dropped my brother, and the two of us skittered away. But not Sozin. He stayed behind to tell the guy to never touch his friends again or else next time he’d burn the guy’s hair to ash.” Roku laughed quietly at the memory. “That’s Sozin.”

Gyatso smiled. “What was your brother’s name?”

“Yasu,” Roku said.

“Yasu,” Gyatso repeated as if the name were sacred. Then, “My sister’s name was Yama.”

“They share a syllable,” Roku noted.

Gyatso nodded. “This island Sozin wrote to you about—do you really believe we’re close to finding it?”

Roku stared out into the darkness. “I do.”

“Then let’s keep looking,” Gyatso said.



“Why is Air Nomad food so bland?” Roku asked as he snacked on stale crackers he’d swiped from the temple’s pantry. They were flying on Lola through a clear blue sky the next morning, the sea shimmering below.

Gyatso snatched the crackers out of Roku’s hands. “Those are sky bison biscuits,” he explained, and tossed them over the edge toward Lola’s mouth. She snatched them out of the air and then grumbled appreciatively.

Roku wiped off his tongue. “Even so, I’ve been eating your food for months. Didn’t any of your nomadic ancestors ever come across spices in their travels?”

“Please. You’re talking about food when your people are morally backward.”

“Backward?”

“Yes,” Gyatso said. “Like your monarchy. You really think a single person calling all the shots is a good idea? And have you ever had a female leader? Do you even have a term for that—Fire Madam? Fire Mistress? Fire Lady?”

“At least we don’t segregate our major cities by gender.”

“There are good reasons for Air Nuns and Air Monks to study and train apart,” Gyatso said. “And besides, we’re not just flexible when it comes to airbending—Air Nomads can move temples if their understanding of their own gender shifts.”

Roku didn’t know that and found it rather interesting. But he wasn’t about to admit that aloud. “Another thing I’ll never understand is your whole neutrality stance. Don’t you get that doing nothing is doing something? Avatar Kyoshi said that standing idly by when injustice occurs allows that injustice to continue. Swooping in afterward to provide aid after the conflict doesn’t help end the conflict.”

“There wouldn’t be so much fighting if everyone were pacifists like us,” Gyatso explained. “My sister always thought we should go abroad to spread our teachings.”

Roku shook his head. “You’ll never convince Fire Nationals to give up Komodo kabobs.”

“And what about all your silly slang?”

“What silly slang?”

Gyatso scoffed. “Are you going to pretend that you don’t greet your countrymen with a hearty ‘Flamey-o, hotman!’?”

“Nobody says that,” Roku said.

“Not *yet*,” Gyatso said with a mischievous smile. “But give me some time.”

Roku thought about that for a beat. “You’re going to create new Fire Nation slang and somehow get it to spread across the archipelago . . . as a joke?”

“Never underestimate my dedication.”

Roku was about to enlighten Gyatso regarding another flaw with Air Nomad philosophy when he noticed a smudge of white on the otherwise uninterrupted blue of the horizon. He sat up and pointed to the spot in the distance. “What’s that?”

Gyatso looked. “A cloud?”

But as Lola carried them closer, it became clear that the wide swath of gray-white mist did not hang in the sky but sat upon the water—and it remained unnaturally fixed in the same area.

Roku checked the inscrutable map. Had he finally cracked Sozin's cipher and successfully navigated them to the island, or had they stumbled upon it by dumb luck? He decided it was the former. "See—I knew where we were going all along."

"Right," Gyatso said. "Lola and I thank you for a lovely, meandering tour of the South Sea."

Lola grumbled her disagreement.

Roku rolled up and stowed the map, his nerves starting to kick in. This was supposed to be the easy part.

"You're very welcome," he said.

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SWEAR TO THE SPIRITS

Despite Gyatso's commands and Roku's attempts at snack bribery, Lola refused to fly into the fog. Instead, she continued to circle its perimeter, seeking a break in the dense mist.

If the shape of the fog echoed the shape of the island, it was a vaguely crescent-formed piece of land, dozens of miles long and several miles wide. The soaring height of the haze toward the interior suggested formidable mountains, probably a volcano given that it was part of a small chain. But it was impossible to determine any specific geographical features, such as where Lola might be able to land safely. A ship approaching on the sea that happened to notice the strange formation certainly wouldn't risk the approach unless its captain had a death wish. Roku had no idea how the Earth Kingdom could have made it ashore.

"Try telling Lola to go lower again," Roku said after they'd looped around a second time. "I'm sure once we get in there, we'll be able to find somewhere to land."

"Or we'll slam into the side of a cliff and instantly die," Gyatso said, peering over the side of the saddle.

"Just tell her."

Gyatso huffed, pulled the reins, and called down to Lola, "Lower, please!"

Lola didn't go any lower.

Gyatso shrugged. "She's her own sky bison."

Roku gazed at the bizarrely dense mist. A note on Sozin's map had described a thick fog that always covered the island during the day, but he hadn't expected it to be *this* thick. It almost seemed solid. Disproving this thought, a flock of birds appeared out of the gray-white mist a moment later, soaring out over the sea.

This gave Roku an idea. He scooted across the saddle, grabbed Gyatso's staff, and held it out to the Airbender. "Lola won't fly into the fog, but we can."

Gyatso shook his head. “You know the elders restricted me from flying for a good reason, right?”

“I believe in you,” Roku lied.

“That’s a lie.”

Roku prodded Gyatso with the staff. “It’s the only way.”

Gyatso still didn’t take it. “Even if I could somehow bend the air around my glider, there’s still the whole slamming-into-the-side-of-a-mountain possibility.”

“We approach from the edge. Aim for the shore.”

“Have you already forgotten how rocky the coasts were around every other island in this chain? If we were on a ship, we wouldn’t have been able to land on any of them.”

“Maybe not if an Airbender were at the helm.” Roku poked Gyatso again.

Gyatso pushed the staff away. “I can’t do it.”

Roku sighed, then laid down the staff in front of Gyatso. He gathered his things into his satchel and stood, his long hair whipping across his face. “You told me you wanted to come on this journey because you thought that me endangering my life would give you opportunities to reconnect with your airbending. Well . . .”

“You wouldn’t—”

Roku smirked and leaned back until he fell over the side of the sky bison.

His stomach dropped, and he lost his smirk. The air rushed around him as he twisted around until he faced the sea. Fear gripped his insides. He’d probably break several bones when he hit the surface. If he survived that, he’d be at the mercy of the open water—his least favorite place in the world. Maybe he hadn’t thought this through enough . . .

But a moment later, Gyatso plucked Roku out of the air. Keeping one hand on his staff-turned-glider, he clutched the back of the Avatar’s robes in his other fist. Roku reached both hands up and gripped Gyatso’s arm, beaming. “It worked!”

“Don’t speak too soon,” Gyatso said. His eyes were fixed on the island, his mouth grimacing with the combined effort of bending the air around his glider while supporting the full weight of another human being.

They soared awkwardly, the glider cutting a wobbly path through the air. They coasted in fits and starts, swinging and jerking randomly from side to side. They plunged several feet, leveled out, dropped again, leveled out again. All the while, they were rapidly losing altitude. By Roku's estimate, they'd hit the water before they reached the island.

"I'm going to drop you!" Gyatso called down.

Roku glanced at his feet and the water skimming past below. His heart stuttered. "No!"

"We're close enough—just swim ashore!"

"No!"

"On the count of three!"

"I said no!"

"One . . ."

"I swear to the spirits, if you—"

"Two . . ."

"Gyatso, I'll k—"

"Three!"

Roku struggled to hold on as Gyatso shook his arm free. Roku slipped off, dropped through the air, and splashed into the water a few feet before the wall of fog.

He kicked his legs and thrashed his arms. He knew how to swim but hadn't in years, and panic prevented his limbs from coordinating their movements. He gasped for air but instead inhaled a mouthful of briny water.

It turned out the Avatar's life wouldn't be snuffed out by the earth but by the water—a more fitting end for a Firebender, and for Roku, especially.

"It's shallow enough to stand," Gyatso said, having made his way over to Roku at some point during Roku's splashy demise.

Roku righted himself in the water—and his feet touched sand. He stopped flailing and stood. Small waves lapped at his chest. "I know—I was only joking."

Gyatso chuckled, turned away, and started treading through the surprisingly warm shallows aided by his staff. "Sure."

Roku flipped his hair out of his face and followed the Air Nomad into the fog. "I was."

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NOT REALLY A BIRD GUY

As Roku wrung out his hair on a narrow strip of rocky beach, he inwardly acknowledged Gyatso had made the right call. If they'd tried riding the glider into the fog, Roku's dangling body would almost certainly have smashed into one of the numerous rocky spires jutting out of the shallows that they'd trudged past on their way to reach the shore.

Nearby, Gyatso attempted to airbend himself dry. Failing, he peeled off his robes and began methodically squeezing out the water. "We could play airball on those," he said, referring to the same towering stone formations—now lost in the mist—that Roku had been thinking about, which indeed resembled the dense field of wooden posts of varying heights upon which the Airbenders played their favorite game.

Roku retied his hair and put his headpiece back in place. "I've sailed across the Fire Islands several times, and I've never seen a coast like this."

"Let me guess," Gyatso said, "vacations on your family's pleasure vessel?"

The answer was yes, but Roku didn't want to admit it. "It's unnatural is all I'm saying. Just like this fog."

Gyatso nodded. "This place has a strange spiritual energy. Do you feel it?"

Did he?

He did not.

Was the Avatar supposed to be able to perceive spiritual energies like that? He felt unsettled and disoriented, but maybe that wasn't due to the place's energy as much as the fact the fog was so thick he could only see about a dozen feet in any direction.

"Maybe there's more to this island than Sozin told you," Gyatso added.

"Maybe," Roku said, but he doubted it. Why would Sozin keep anything from him?

Gyatso squinted upward, worry etched on his face. "I hope Lola's okay."

“She’ll be fine,” Roku said. “Probably went back to the Southern Air Temple. Or maybe she’ll stay close by since the two of you are so spiritually connected.”

“Why did you say it like that?”

Roku shrugged, thinking of the many times the sky bison refused the young Airbender’s simplest of commands.

“Or maybe your special Avatar animal guide can help us the next time we’re in need,” Gyatso said. “Oh, wait—you don’t have one.”

“Avatar Kyoshi didn’t bond with hers until later in life,” Roku said, trying not to sound too defensive.

“But Avatar Szeto grew up with his dragon, right?” Gyatso asked.

Begrudgingly, Roku nodded.

They finished squeezing as much water out of their robes as they could, took stock of their surviving provisions and possessions, and assessed their surroundings. The air was hot and humid, the sun nothing but a faint glow in the fog directly overhead. From what they could tell after wandering around a bit, dense vegetation pushed nearly to the edge of the water, leaving the thin strip of rocky sand upon which they now sat. They could either head west into the island’s interior or follow the coast.

“Which way?” Gyatso asked.

Roku had a notoriously terrible sense of direction, but Gyatso didn’t need to know that. “We jumped off Lola when we were south of the island. And, according to Ta Min, the Fire Nation patrol encountered the Earth Kingdom on the eastern coast. So, if we follow the beach northeast, we should eventually find them.”

“And when we do?”

“I’ll notify them that they’re in Fire Nation territory.”

“Then politely ask them to leave?”

Roku shrugged. “Basically.”

“And if they refuse?”

“They won’t.”

Gyatso raised an eyebrow. “But if they do?”

“I’ll make them,” Roku said, annoyed.

“Such cunning.”

Roku stood and started walking.

“Um.” Gyatso pointed his staff in the opposite direction. “Northeast is that way.”



The coast continued as a slim strip of beach, sandier in some areas, rockier in others, meandering east or west before always returning north. After hours of walking, Roku and Gyatso still hadn't come across any boat docked in the shallows or a single footprint pressed into the sand, so when the already dim light began quickly dimming further, they stopped to rest for the evening.

They ventured into the thick forest only far enough to collect kindling and downed branches, unsure of what dangers it held. Roku used his firebending to start a campfire, as Gyatso improvised a shelter in case it rained. As night fell, the fog dissipated only to be replaced by darkness, and they could see nothing on the beach beyond the glow of the fire. But a clear, moonless sky brimming with stars stretched over the blue-black waves to the east.

Gyatso roasted some seaweed he'd collected along the way while Roku tucked a crab into the coals. As they waited for their respective meals to cook, Roku used his firebending to make a cup of tea. He inhaled the spicy aroma, took a sip, and let out a contented sigh.

“Can I try it?” Gyatso said. Roku passed the cup. Gyatso blew on it to cool down the beverage a few degrees, then drank. “That's actually really good.”

“Fire Nation tea leaves,” Roku said as he took the cup back. He breathed in the scent again, which smelled of home. “They told me not to bring anything, but I couldn't resist sneaking a few pouches into my robes as I left. I've been saving them for special occasions.”

“Like finding a secret island?”

“The Avatar's first victory,” Roku said humorlessly. Then he raised the cup, sipped, and passed it back to Gyatso.

“As long as you keep sharing your stash with me, I won't tell Sister Disha about your contraband.”

“You wouldn't.”

“Of course I would—you've had Air Nomad tea. It's like sky bison backwash.” Gyatso shuddered. “No way I'm going back to that.”

Roku laughed. Nobody who appreciated a fine cup of tea could be all that bad. Maybe as the young Airbender matured, he would become less irritating.



Out of habit, Roku woke up in the predawn darkness. He had always been an early riser, finding his mind clearest in those quiet moments before the rest of the world began to stir. Since Gyatso was not, he went ahead and lit the morning fire, meditated as the island's birds took up their songs, then began practicing the air-bending forms he'd watched Gyatso use the other night.

The eastern sky was turning a pale blue and the fog was gathering when Gyatso wandered over. The young Airbender looked more sleepy-eyed than usual wrapped in his robes as if they were the finest sky bison fur blanket.

Roku stopped, embarrassed at having been caught clumsily imitating Gyatso's expert movements. "Can I help you?"

"No," Gyatso said. "But I can help you."

Roku perked up. "You'll give me some tips?"

"Sure." Gyatso yawned. "First thing to know is how to fall."

"What do I do?"

Gyatso made his way over. "We'll start simple. Stand here, facing me."

Roku did as instructed, eager for his first real lesson.

"I'm going to push you over."

"That's it?" Roku asked, skeptical.

"Yes—but remember, airbending is about letting go. Don't try to break your fall. Just close your eyes and visualize the air beneath your body taking the shape of a cushion."

"That's it?" Roku asked again. "Don't I need to move my arms or anything?"

"No. That's it. Ready?"

Roku nodded, closed his eyes, and imagined a cushion of air.

Gyatso pushed.

Roku fell straight onto his back with a heavy thud. Scowling, Roku opened his eyes and sat up.

"Great work." Gyatso smirked. "But here's a suggestion: Wait for your airbending master." He turned and wandered back to the fire.



After breakfast, they gathered their things and continued their seemingly endless hike along the hazy coast. They walked without speaking, and for the first few hours, the scenery that passed within their limited field of vision was more of the same as the day before. But then the sandy strip of beach narrowed until it disappeared completely. They were forced into the vegetation, which slowed their progress to a crawl given the tangled undergrowth and dense trees that choked the pathless way.

“I don’t recognize many of these plants,” Gyatso said, stopping to examine a string of tiny, bright red spiraling flowers that blossomed along a vine. “Do you?”

“I’m not really a plant guy,” Roku said.

Gyatso leaned on his staff, tilting an ear to the air. “And the birds—do you hear them?”

Roku listened. Something squawked. It sounded like a squawk.

“Strange, right?” Gyatso asked.

“I’m not really a bird guy, either,” Roku said and kept walking.

“I am,” Gyatso said, following. “Birds are great. Did you know that—”

“I’m not interested in anything you’re about to say,” Roku interrupted.

“You’re not into plants and you’re not into birds. What are you into?”

Roku thought about it. “I’m more of a dragon guy.”

Gyatso scoffed. “You’re not a dragon guy.”

“You don’t know me.”

“I know you enough to know that you want people to *think* you’re a dragon guy but aren’t really a dragon guy.”

Roku didn’t dignify that with a response.

Soon, the ground began to slope upward. To their right, the sea dropped into the fog and the sound of the waves faded as they ascended. In the distance, something squawked again.

After a while, Roku’s lungs and legs began burning from the steep climb, and his arms grew tired from pushing aside branches and creepers. When he stopped to take a drink of water, Gyatso—who didn’t seem winded at all—calmly walked to the very edge of the cliff and gazed into the void of gray-white mist. “This would be a beautiful view if the air were clear.”

“But it’s not,” Roku said.

Maybe he’d chosen the wrong way and he was leading them into the mountains. Some Avatar he was turning out to be—almost assassinated by a lone Earthbender, unable to read a map, now lost in the fog.

But then a little while later, the ground finally began to slope downward as it curved inward. Relief washed over Roku—they had crested the hill’s peak. And when they came down the other side, they finally found what they’d been searching for.

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A RAT-SNAKE'S UNDERBELLY

After speaking with Ulo, Malaya finished the rest of her business in the village, mounted Kilat, and went off to find Amihan. Despite the gorilla-tarsier's size and impressive musculature, the agile creature leapt from tree to tree like a whisper through the leaves, aided by elongated fingers and toes and oversized eyes that helped her see in the constant dim lighting of her native habitat. She carried Malaya away from the village, up the valley, through the mountains, and down the other side in a fraction of the time it would have taken Malaya by foot.

They caught up to the clan's airbending scout at the waterfalls halfway up the river on the coastal side of the eastern mountains. Amihan was atop her own gorilla-tarsier, keeping an eye on the Earthbenders from the forest's canopy.

"They're as pale as a rat-snake's underbelly," she said as Malaya and Kilat arrived.

Malaya ignored the comment and peered through the fog. She could make out the mother and daughter Earthbenders sitting together on a wide, flat rock below. The four guards weren't within her sight, but she heard them in the fog beyond, splashing in the tiered, natural pools formed by the series of low, rocky waterfalls.

Amihan's attention shifted to Malaya. "What did Ulo say?"

"Get them to leave."

"That's all?"

Malaya nodded and shared her plan. It was inspired by the way she retrieved viper eggs. Basically, she'd lure the Earthbenders away from their possessions and then swipe their packs. The Earthbenders were no survivalists, so without their equipment, she hoped they'd have no choice but to retreat to their ship and sail home.

The trickiest part had been figuring out how to separate the outsiders from their things, which they always carried on their backs or kept close at hand. The waterfalls, however, had presented her with the perfect

opportunity. Malaya just had to make sure she wasn't caught—which was where Amihan's air-bending came in.

When she finished explaining the plan, the Airbender looked unimpressed. "Or," she said after a moment, "we wait until they've reached the mountain pass, and then I'll blow them off the ridge."

Malaya blinked. "Just listen for my signal."

"Fine. How long will you need?"

Malaya estimated how long it would take her to sneak up, swipe the packs, and stash them well enough that the outsiders wouldn't find them. "A few minutes. I'll signal again when I'm done."

Amihan nodded, and Malaya spurred Kilat away. They followed the tree line upstream until the Earthbenders' packs materialized out of the fog, clustered together in a pile on the rocks. As she'd hoped, they were unguarded. She tapped the gorilla-tarsier's right shoulder twice, and Kilat latched onto a nearby tree trunk and slid silently down.

Malaya dismounted, leaving her weapons secured to Kilat's saddle since she wouldn't need them. She stroked the velvety light gray fur on the back of the gorilla-tarsier's neck and signaled for her to wait nearby. Kilat nodded then scaled the tree, disappearing into the fog overhead.

Approaching as softly as on a hunt, Malaya stepped out of the trees and took in her surroundings. The riverbank's expanse of flat rocks stretched out in front of her. The packs sat about a dozen paces away at the edge of her field of vision. The rushing of the falls and splashing of the Earthbenders told her the guards were about twice as far away on the other side of the packs. And from the faint murmur of conversation, she knew the mother and daughter were still a good distance downstream where she'd parted ways with Amihan.

Malaya rolled out her neck, took a deep breath, and crept forward. She had planned to grab all the packs at once—but as she got closer, she saw that each was stuffed to capacity with an array of tools and equipment tied to the outside. As strong as she was, she'd have to make a few trips and hope Amihan's airbending held.

Ready, Malaya cupped her hands over her mouth, took another deep breath, and let out a series of rich, rapid squawks that imitated the sound of a male firefly-starling during mating season.

Nothing happened for a few moments. Then a breeze began to stir the air. Branches shifted and leaves fluttered. The sound of falling water shifted. And the fog began to condense. It closed in, measure by measure, swallowing each tree and shrub and rock and root until the already limited world became a completely gray-white void. Soon enough, Malaya couldn't even see her own feet.

As the Earthbenders began to call out to each other in surprise and confusion, Malaya got to work. Relying on the mental map she'd constructed before signaling Amihan, she slipped silently through the mist. She lifted one pack, tested the weight—and grabbed two more. Then she dipped back into the trees, stowed the packs within a dense thicket of undergrowth behind a rocky outcropping, and returned for the rest.

Malaya had just stepped back onto the flat stones of the riverbed when she bumped into someone—a woman cried out in surprise as they stumbled apart, and Malaya stifled her own urge to do the same.

“Is that you, Xia?” the woman asked.

Malaya froze. It was the mother.

The woman stepped forward. Malaya stepped back.

“I'm over here!” a young woman—Xia, the daughter—responded a few steps away from Malaya. “The fog is just as thick farther away from the river— isn't that fascinating?”

Malaya was caught between the women. She had thought they'd stay put as their visibility diminished, but instead their curiosity had sent them wandering to inspect the limits of the phenomena.

Malaya started to edge away when the wind suddenly died down. As the air stilled, the fog began to lift. In reverse of earlier, the world began to reappear. Panic set in as Malaya waited for Amihan to renew her airbending efforts.

But before she knew it, both women came into view, steps away. A moment later, their eyes widened as they saw Malaya.

“Who are you?” mother and daughter asked at the same time.

Malaya ran.

“Wait—” the daughter called after her.

“There's someone out here!” called one of the guards, spotting Malaya through the thinning mist. “Stop!”

“I've got her!” someone called.

“Don’t hurt her!” the mother pleaded from somewhere behind Malaya as a rush of footsteps gave chase.

The ground trembled, and a wall of rock burst into existence in front of Malaya to block her way. But she leapt on top and whistled through her fingers as she rode the rising stone. A moment later, Kilat swung through the trees, plucked Malaya from danger, and slung her onto the saddle.

Malaya twisted around as she drew her bow and nocked an arrow—but Kilat carried her from tree to tree so swiftly that nobody was following. Malaya lowered her weapon and tapped the gorilla-tarsier once on the left shoulder. Kilat came to a stop.

As she caught her breath, Malaya scanned the canopy for any sign of Amihan. Had she been caught? Is that why her air-bending had failed? Ulo would be angry enough that the outsiders had spotted Malaya, but who knew what he would do if her failed plan cost the clan their veteran scout.

But the sound of the Airbender’s approaching laughter put those fears to immediate rest. Amihan emerged from the fog a few moments later on her own gorilla-tarsier, cracking up so hard that she was clutching her gut with tears in her eyes.

Malaya’s concern turned to anger. “What happened back there?!”

Amihan tried to speak but she was still laughing too hard. Eventually, her cackling subsided and she caught her breath. After a deep, satisfied exhale, she finally said, “You should have seen your face.”

“Ami, stop it—why did the fog thin?”

Amihan grinned. “I wanted to see what would happen.”

Malaya gave her a blank stare. She could not believe this. The woman had sabotaged their mission out of a sense of—what—morbid curiosity? “They nearly caught me!” Malaya said.

“Calm down. You’re fine.”

“I wouldn’t have been if it weren’t for Kilat.”

Amihan shrugged.

“And now,” Malaya added, “they’re definitely not going to leave!”

“Because of what I did to that big Earthbender?”

“Wait—what? What big Earthbender? What did you do to a big Earthbender?”

“Nothing.”

Malaya decided to deal with that issue later. “They saw me,” she said, thinking of the mother and daughter’s driving curiosity. “Now they’ll search for our village.”

Amihan picked a leaf out of her short black hair, bored with the conversation. “It doesn’t matter. Your plan was never going to work. They weren’t going to leave. They never do.”

“What do you mean?”

She looked at Malaya. “You really believe a scout’s true task is simply to spy on outsiders?”

Malaya didn’t say anything. That’s what Ulo had always told the clan.

“So naïve. You probably believe all his other stories too.” Amihan spelled it out: “We hunt outsiders, Malaya. That’s our real job.”

Malaya shook her head. It couldn’t be true. “Then why did Ulo let me try to make them leave?”

“He was humoring you. If it were up to me, you would’ve known on your first day as a scout. But he believes it’s better for us to come to the realization on our own that there’s no other way to keep the clan safe.”

Malaya considered the mother and daughter. She’d been tracking them long enough to know they weren’t a threat, and the guards were only there to protect them. If she could only speak to the women and explain about Yungib, she was certain they’d understand and leave the clan—and the island—alone. They didn’t deserve to die.

“You don’t believe me,” Amihan said. “Go back and tell Ulo what happened here. Then see what he says.”

Malaya turned Kilat around and started back for the village. “I will,” she said over her shoulder, telling herself this was simply another of the Airbender’s twisted jokes.

“And while you’re there,” Amihan called after her from the fog, “be sure to sharpen your blade.”

A HURT SO DEEP

When Roku and Gyatso came down from the hill that hugged the coast, they found themselves in a sweeping cove with a wide stretch of beach and calm water. And it was not long before the remnants of a campsite appeared out of the fog ahead.

Several sets of footprints crossed the sand. There were a few stone shelters that could have only been made with earthbending and the charred remains of a large firepit. Roku was wondering if the Earthbenders had already left, but then he found a landing boat that had been dragged ashore and tied to a tree. Roku searched for a larger vessel anchored in deeper water from which the small boat must have launched, but he couldn't see anything through the gray-white mist.

Gyatso lined up his foot alongside one of the better-preserved footprints pressed into the sand. "Whoa—this guy must be a giant! Think you can take him?"

Roku turned around. It was a big footprint. "I'm not here to fight anyone."

"Didn't you say you were going to 'make them' leave?"

Roku ignored the annoying Airbender and surveyed the rest of the tracks, comparing the different sizes. "There must be seven or eight altogether," he guessed. "And judging by the state of that firepit, they must have moved camp a few days ago."

"To where?"

Roku followed the freshest line of footprints through the fog. They led to the tree line, where he found the start of a trampled path through the undergrowth. "This way."

Gyatso came over and eyed the narrow trail, which, like everything else here, disappeared into the fog. "The way your girlfriend described the situation, I thought we'd find an actual Earth Kingdom military outpost. You know, fortress made of boulders, ramparts, big green Earth Kingdom flags flapping in the wind, bulky guys wearing those pointy helmets. Things

like that. Not, like, half a dozen people camping on a beach then going for a hike.”

Roku had been thinking the same thing even though he didn’t say so. “They probably landed here, and then established their outpost on higher ground. Maybe near a drinking water source. I’m sure if we follow their path, we’ll find it. And Ta Min isn’t my girlfriend.”

Gyatso looked at Roku, skeptical. “You’re telling me they left the coast of a stolen island completely unguarded?”

“The Earth Kingdom isn’t known for their cunning tactics.”

“That’s an overgeneralization,” Gyatso said. “Which doesn’t surprise me coming from a Fire National. Even so, it’s not military strategy—it’s basic logic. Something’s not adding up here.”

The comment irked Roku. “I’m sure there’s an explanation.”

“Yeah, like I said before—maybe your friend is keeping something from you.”

Roku started down the path. “Why would he do that?”

Gyatso followed. “Beats me—you’re the one who knows him so well.”

Roku clenched his jaw and considered—then quickly dismissed—the possibility. If he couldn’t trust his closest friend in the world, then whom could he trust?

Yet, Gyatso’s suggestion continued to bother him as they made their way deeper inland. If Sister Disha were there, she’d ask why that was the case if Roku felt so confident that Sozin had been honest with him. But since she wasn’t, it was a question Roku didn’t have to answer.



Thanks to the path the Earthbenders had already made through the dense vegetation, Roku and Gyatso moved considerably faster than they would have otherwise. Low hanging vines or branches had already been cut clear. Rocks had been forced out of the way or shifted over to provide helpful steps up steep inclines. And judging by the number of old Earthbender campsites Roku and Gyatso passed, the pair was traveling at least five or six times faster.

The path pushed nearly straight west through a mostly level forest dense with tall trees that had sprawling, buttress roots and branches that hung somewhere high in the fog overhead. Unfamiliar birdcalls and insect sounds

filled the air, growing quiet as Roku and Gyatso approached, then starting back up after they had passed. All the while, unseen creatures scuttled and shifted and rustled just out of sight.

As the dim glow of the sun lowered toward the horizon, the forest gave way to a mangrove swamp. They debated setting up camp at the edge of the swamp, but Roku insisted they push onward and find a place to rest for the evening on the other side. Gyatso reluctantly agreed since the Earthbenders had conveniently left behind a walkway of raised stone steps that traversed the swamp.

“So, you’ve really never played Pai Sho?” Roku asked as he hopped cautiously from one pillar to another, continuing a conversation they’d been having earlier.

“Nope,” Gyatso said. He was farther ahead, dancing gracefully across and doubling back periodically to let Roku catch up. “Some of the monks play, but whenever I’ve tried watching, I fall asleep before it’s over.”

“Sozin and I used to play all the time,” Roku said.

“Let me guess—you usually lost?”

“I held my own.”

“Sure.”

“I did. Anyway, I’ll teach you someday if you teach me airball once I can airbend.”

“I don’t really have a desire to learn.” Gyatso paused and turned around just in time to watch Roku jump from one stone to the next, clip a tree branch, and windmill his arms to stop himself from losing his balance.

“And maybe you should stick to Pai Sho.”

Roku smirked. “You’re just afraid I’d beat you at your own sport.”

Gyatso turned around without saying anything and hopped ahead.

“Wait, are you actually afraid?” Roku said, trying to catch up.

“No. At least, not of you beating me.”

“Then of what?”

Gyatso stopped. He peered into his reflection in the water. “That I’ll never airbend well enough even to play airball again.”

“Ah,” Roku said, reaching the stone pillar next to the Air Nomad, who now wore a sullen expression. He wanted to say something else, to know more about Gyatso’s sister—but he was unsure if he should. Roku understood what it was like to have a hurt so deep that thinking or talking

about it too much renewed the pain. “*Now* do you want to talk about it?” he finally decided to ask.

Gyatso stood and stirred the murky water with his staff so his reflection fractured. Roku thought the young Airbender was about to ignore the question, but then he spoke. “I was the youngest Air Nomad to master the eighteenth tier in decades. I was even on track to earn my arrows by the time I reached your age—if you can believe it.”

“I can,” Roku said.

Gyatso sighed. “But after Yama died, everything changed. I can’t channel the peace and calm I need to focus my energy like I could before. Now my spirit feels so . . . Uncentered? Broken? Angry? Not sure of the right word to describe it.”

“I know what you mean,” Roku said, remembering the hollow feeling that had followed him for so long after his own brother’s death and still returned without warning from time to time when he least expected it.

Gyatso wiped his eyes. “You felt something like that after you lost Yasu?”

Roku nodded.

“But it went away?” Gyatso asked.

“Not entirely,” Roku said. “But it became less constant.”

Gyatso was quiet for several moments. “There’s a big part of me that doesn’t want that, you know? That feels like if I stop grieving my sister—even for a moment—then that means I’m forgetting her.”

Roku nodded, intimately familiar with the heavy guilt that accompanied moving on and finding a way to smile and laugh and live again.

“This isn’t the Air Nomad way, of course,” Gyatso continued. “The monks keep reminding me about how everything is temporary. But if reconnecting with my airbending means I need to stop loving Yama, maybe it’s not worth it.”

“Your people really love the principle of detachment,” Roku said.

“They really do. And I get it with most everything else. Just not this.”

Roku wanted to say the right thing to reassure Gyatso, but after Yasu’s death, how many times had some well-meaning person offered up some shallow cliché that only made Roku feel worse? Instead, he recalled the shape of his grief and how it evolved over the years. “Maybe you don’t need to stop loving her to find your balance again,” he offered. “Maybe it’s

that you need to figure out what it means to love her when she's no longer with you."

Gyatso looked up with raised his eyebrows. "You're not as foolish as everyone says, Avatar Roku."

"Thanks, Airbender Gyatso." Roku smiled. And since Gyatso had opened up to him, he thought he should do the same. "Anyway, want to know why Sister Disha won't even start teaching me airbending yet?"

"Not really," Gyatso said. "It's pretty obvious."

"No, it's not."

Gyatso swung his staff just above Roku's head, knocking off his golden headpiece with a clang. Roku lunged for the dual-flamed adornment—and caught it as he splashed into the swamp. Roku sat up in the shallow muddy water, pushed the wet hair out of his face, and glared at Gyatso. Instead of anger, though, laughter rose from his chest. And when Gyatso reached down to help him up, Roku pulled the Airbender down into the muck alongside him.

BONES IN THE EARTH

The fog was lifting and the sun was setting by the time Malaya arrived at the caves. They were tucked into the far end of the valley, the entrance a rocky gap in the earth draped by hanging roots and curtains of overgrowth. Formed by ancient lava flows, the labyrinthine multilevel network of tunnels twisted deep into the mountains. At its heart was the vast chamber of the Sacred Cave—which Malaya had never actually seen. Only Ulo and the other benders were allowed to enter Yungib's space.

Malaya dismounted Kilat and climbed down into the pit, biting her lip. Her feet crunched across loose gravel as she made her way toward where the others in the village had told her she'd find the clan's chief. The air was damp and cool, the way darker with each step. But Malaya had a keen sense of direction and knew she did not need to venture far.

Sure enough, she found Ulo in a passage a short distance from the entrance. He was touching up one of the many charcoal murals on the walls that depicted the most significant events of the island's history, his long gray hair tied back. His lantern flickered on the ground next to him, casting a long, shifting shadow toward Malaya.

Ulo did not stop working as she approached. His eyes had the focused, faraway look of someone so possessed by a task that the rest of the world had fallen away.

So, she continued to wait. Her palms were sweating, her heart was racing, and her mind was still reeling from what had happened with the Earthbenders—and from what Amihan had told her. She did not know if she was more frightened to deliver the news of her failure or to receive his next set of instructions.

After a few more moments, Ulo finally faced Malaya. He offered his free hand, and she pressed the back of it to her forehead in the traditional sign of respect for the clan chief. He withdrew his hand as she stepped back.

"You failed," he guessed, blue eyes boring into her.

Malaya nodded. She summarized what had happened at the waterfalls. Then she lowered her eyes and waited for Ulo's anger, waited for him to criticize both Malaya's ill-conceived plan and Amihan's colossal carelessness.

Instead, he simply sighed and turned his attention back to the drawing on the wall, which depicted the Awakening of Yungib, and went back to work.

The lantern's flame flickered. The stick of charcoal scratched across the stone. Ulo's silence stretched on.

Should she say something? Apologize? Present a new plan for turning the Earthbenders away? Or simply leave?

"Do you remember the story of the Ibalon clan?" he asked at last as he continued to touch up the mural.

"Yes, Ulo."

He retold the story anyway. "Long ago, the Ibalon clan lived along the Oryol River. One day, a group of Waterbenders shipwrecked on the southern coast. In their search for help, they discovered the Ibalon village."

Ulo paused, stepped back to examine the drawing, then resumed his work. "Despite the advice of the other clan chiefs, the Ibalon decided to welcome the survivors. They tended to the outsiders' wounds, shared their food and drink, taught them their ways, and even helped build a new vessel. The Waterbenders overflowed with gratitude and swore eternal friendship. Before they returned home, the Ibalon chief asked them to never tell anyone of the island. They promised they would not." Ulo stepped back from the wall again, brushed off his hands, and looked at Malaya. "And what happened next?"

Malaya cleared her throat. "A few moons later, more Water-benders arrived—and wiped the Ibalon from the riverside."

Ulo nodded.

But was that true? The last time she'd heard him tell the story, it was the Tunasan River, not the Oryol. She wasn't as naïve as Amihan thought. She had simply learned not to question Ulo. But in doing so, had she been willfully ignoring darker truths? Maybe there had never been an Ibalon clan. Maybe there had been, but they'd killed the Waterbenders on sight. Or maybe it was one of the island's other clans—perhaps her own—that had destroyed the river people.

They were exactly the kinds of questions she had learned not to ask over the years, the kind she kept locked away to survive. Yet, here they were now, clawing at the back of her mouth like caged animals thrashing to escape.

“The Earthbenders are moving deeper inland,” he said, “and now they know we’re here. What should we do next, Malaya?”

A sinking feeling settled into her gut. It was a test, and she knew what she was supposed to say. Amihan was right. Had any outsiders ever sailed safely home, or were they all bones in the earth of this island?

But she could not bring herself to give Ulo the answer he wanted. The Earthbenders were no threat. The guards had only attacked her out of self-defense. How could Ulo expect her to kill them all?

Malaya shook her head. “There has to be another way.”

Ulo’s mouth lifted into a bitter smile. “Oh?”

“They don’t deserve to die.”

The clan’s chief clenched his jaw and locked eyes with Malaya. He was giving her a chance to apologize, to drop the challenge from her eyes, to say she had misspoken and that yes, of course, she would do what was required and was there anything else?

But she didn’t.

Ulo dropped the charcoal and snapped his hands upward. A sudden mass of ice formed around Malaya, encasing her entire body in a shock of searing cold.

“Do *we* deserve to die?” Ulo said. Through the ice, his voice was muffled, his image fractal, his words dripping with disgust at her insolence.

But Malaya could not move her mouth to reply even if she wanted to. She was frozen in place, numbness burrowing toward her bones as her lungs ached for air. She was losing feeling in her fingers and toes and ears—how much longer until frostbite set in? How much longer until her organs shut down, her lungs seized, her life faded away?

But then, all at once, the ice melted. Malaya collapsed to the ground, drenched and shivering. Teeth chattering, she tried to stand, but her muscles would not cooperate.

Ulo knelt beside Malaya and helped her into a sitting position. He removed the patterned blanket he wore draped over his shoulders, wrapped it around her, and began to rub her back in small circles.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. “I forgot myself for a moment. This is the first time outsiders have come to the island since you became a scout. Of course you found the reality of what it takes to protect the clan surprising. Objectionable, even.”

Malaya was too shocked, too scared to speak. There was no underground river here—was Ulo really powerful enough to pull moisture from the air to form the ice around her?

Her extremities tingled painfully as feeling returned, and her shivering began to slow with the warmth Ulo’s cloth provided.

“But you’re a smart girl,” Ulo went on. “I know you will understand.”

Malaya kept her questions and doubts to herself this time.

“This mother and daughter you’ve grown so fond of are accompanied by guards. They are not here simply to enjoy the sights of our beautiful island.” Ulo stopped rubbing Malaya’s back but let his hand linger. “They serve someone. The knowledge and samples they collect, the maps and drawings they make, the notes they take and scrolls they write—all of these will pass out of their hands eventually. And then, no matter how well-intentioned the mother and daughter may be, their knowledge will be used against us—against Yungib. History tells us it is inevitable.”

Ulo stood and helped Malaya back onto her feet. She was still damp, shaken but no longer shivering. When she tested her fingers and toes, they ached and moved slowly but without tingling numbness.

“It is admirable that you respect life—we need more in our clan like you. I hope your empathy does not fade with time as often happens as we age. But empathy can cloud our judgment more than the fog clouds our island. Never let it blind you from seeing the truth, from doing what must be done at the most critical moment.”

Footsteps approached from deeper within the caves. Then a light appeared. A trio of Waterbenders were returning from the Sacred Cave. Their day’s work complete, exhaustion ringed their eyes as they took in the unexpected sight of Ulo and Malaya standing by the paintings, water still dripping from the scout’s tolgè skirt and short hair. They took turns touching the back of Ulo’s hand to their foreheads, then continued on their way without saying anything.

Ulo took back the woven blanket. “Return to Amihan,” he ordered, “and take care of the Earthbenders.”

One more shiver ran through Malaya's body. "Yes, Ulo," she said, trying to force herself to believe he was right about everything.

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UNDER THE ALTERED SKY

Roku could not go back to sleep. He gave up trying, climbed quietly to his feet, and wandered a short distance away until he found an opening in the forest's canopy through which he could see the night sky. Conveniently, he found a large, flat rock nearby that looked out of place in the middle of the trees—one of the Earthbenders must have moved it there—and hopped on top. He lay back and looked up at the stars. The air was sweet and warm. Insects clicked and chirped in the surrounding darkness.

They had not found the Earthbenders yet, but they had continued with their swift progress thanks to the already traveled path. After they'd crossed the mangrove swamp, the forest resumed but had begun to slope upward. Grass and ground cover had thinned as the cleared trail became hard-packed dirt and rock and roots. Meanwhile, the trees had grown shorter with sprawling, gnarled branches carpeted in moss, and a stream had appeared alongside them, which widened as they rose in elevation.

It was disorienting and frustrating, though, this movement through fog so thick Roku could not gauge distance. He didn't know how far he had come. He didn't know how far he had yet to go. He simply had to place one foot in front of the other, hoping that they'd take him to the Earthbenders sooner rather than later, and that when they did, he'd conjure the right words to diffuse the situation peacefully.

"Can't sleep either?" came Gyatso's voice from below.

Roku sat up as the Air Nomad hopped atop the rock and took a seat by his side. "No," he said.

"Bad dream?"

"Something like that."

"Me too." Gyatso rubbed his eyes. "Care to share?"

"No."

"Me neither."

They both lay back and turned their eyes to the stars. Roku searched for familiar constellations but couldn't find any. The stars were different here.

Not different—but shifted. Of course, he'd been south of the equator ever since arriving at the Southern Air Temple, but he only now realized that he had yet to take the time to reorient himself under this altered sky.

Movement to the right caught his attention—a scatter of a thousand small shadows fluttering out of the treetops.

“You see that?” he asked. “Must be a flock of bats or night birds or something.”

“Let's hope they're not buzzard-wasps,” Gyatso said.

Roku and Gyatso watched the scattering of small, dark shapes dart across the patch of sky. And then all at once, the flying creatures lit up and became a thousand points of drifting light. The glowing flock turned in on itself, spiraled upward, dove, careened to the right, spiraled upward again, careened to the left, dove again. And then their lights began to pulse in unison. The creatures continued to dance through the air, their movements erratic but harmonious. It was if they shared a single mind. As hypnotic as it was beautiful, Roku and Gyatso did not speak or move until the flying creatures dimmed and disappeared into the distance.

“Wow,” Gyatso said when the spell broke.

Roku let out a long exhale of appreciation. He wished Ta Min had been here to see it. He wished Ta Min were here.

They were quiet again for a long time.

Then, apropos of nothing, Gyatso said, “I dreamt I was riding Lola above the clouds. I felt happier and freer than I have in a long time.” He paused. Rubbed the back of his neck. Took a deep breath. “When she descended, we were at the Southern Air Temple—but it was burning. Every tower, every structure. All of it—on fire.”

“Why?” Roku asked.

“I don't know,” Gyatso said. “But I knew I had to help. I was the only one left who *could* help. I stood with my staff and channeled my chi, preparing to airbend a huge gust of wind, one that would extinguish all the flames. But when I released my energy—nothing happened. I tried again and again and again. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.” He sighed. “Then Lola suddenly banked away from the temple, and I slid off her saddle and dropped through the sky. And then suddenly, I was in the inner sanctuary, cornered by soldiers.”

“Whose?”

Gyatso shrugged. “Not sure. Dream logic, I guess. But I knew they wanted to end me—that they would end me—unless I could airbend. And unless I was willing to use my airbending to take their lives.”

“Did you?”

Gyatso shrugged. “I woke up right as they attacked.”

Roku considered the dream and searched for the right response. The Airbender didn’t need an interpretation—the meaning was obvious enough. He also probably didn’t need some hollow encouragement that there was nothing to worry about.

Sitting up, Roku drew his legs to his chest and rested his chin on his knees. “I dreamt I was swimming with Sozin and Yasu.”

“Oh?” Gyatso asked, visibly relieved they were no longer talking about his own dream.

Roku nodded. “We used to go swimming all the time when we were kids. The three of us would have all these little competitions with each other. Who could hold their breath under the water for the longest. Who could swim the farthest, the fastest. Who could dive the deepest and find the largest oyster.” Roku chuckled. “Sozin and Yasu were sore losers. But not me. I never really cared who won. I was just happy to be with them.”

“What happened in the dream?”

“Nothing,” Roku said. “We were just out there, swimming. The water was warm. The sun was shining. The breeze was gentle. It was a perfect day.”

Gyatso cocked his head. “Doesn’t sound like a bad dream to me.”

“It wasn’t,” Roku said. “The bad part was the waking up.”

DELICATE POLITICAL MANEUVERING

“Watch this!” Gyatso called as he sprinted to the ledge and leapt. He flipped through the fog, and a couple seconds later, splashed safely into the pool of water below. Even though Roku knew it was there, he felt relieved that the Air Nomad hadn’t just jumped to his death.

The river that ran alongside the Earthbenders’ path had brought them to a series of waterfalls that poured into several tiered, small pools. They had each drunk their fill of the icy, refreshing water, then replenished their waterskins and bathed.

“I’m going to do something useful,” Roku said as he wandered away, venturing off the Earthbender-beaten path.

Yesterday, he had found what looked like a dragon paw fruit tree. The familiar round, spiny seed shells hung in clustered bunches of blue instead of red but were otherwise similar enough that he felt safe trying one. And he was glad that he had—it was even juicier and sweeter than the fruit from back home. Roku and Gyatso had gorged themselves, collected as many as they could hold, then finished those off later that night. Since they didn’t suffer any negative effects beyond being so full they could barely move, he hoped to find more today.

Away from the wide, flat stones of the rocky riverbed, the mountainside sloped steeply, carpeted in half-decayed leaves and stalks and fronds. Large, sharp rocks and gnarled roots protruded from the ground, forcing Roku to step slowly and carefully as he scanned the branches overhead for the blue, spiky fruit. Soon, Gyatso’s splashing grew so faint he could barely hear it.

The young Airbender was starting to grow on him, and not just because they shared similar losses. He was a far cry from the kind of companion Sozin would have been and still annoyed Roku from time to time, but less often now. And if it weren’t for Gyatso, Roku would be out with the Southern Water Tribe ladling soup or melting ice under the judgmental gaze of Sister Disha. Instead, he was here. On this island. On the Earthbenders’

trail. Trying to prove that he was ready to be the Avatar the world needed. If he did, Sister Disha would *have* to start teaching him airbending.

He still didn't feel like the Avatar, but maybe that didn't matter. As they were growing up, on how many occasions had he watched Sozin dive headfirst into practicing some new fire-bending form or ability even when he had no idea what he was doing? Time and again, their tutors or teachers—or even Fire Lord Taiso—would insist he wasn't ready. Time and again, Sozin would prove them wrong. That kind of confidence was the key.

If only Roku possessed that kind of confidence. It might be a different story if being the Avatar was an honor he had earned instead of a random coincidence of his birth. Besides his continuing inability to bend any element other than fire, he still hadn't been able to reach Avatar Kyoshi. The historians usually painted her life with broad strokes, highlighting her numerous victories and occasional controversies, but they rarely offered insight into what she thought or felt. That's what Roku needed to know—hence the reason he tried connecting to her every time he meditated. He needed to ask if she had ever felt this unsure of herself, especially after she'd first been identified as the Avatar. He needed to ask if she ever felt like being the Avatar was a burden she wished she could shed for the sake of returning to her old life. He needed to ask if she ever felt like she was a mistake, and if so, he needed to know how she found a way forward.

He wasn't sure if communing with his past lives would be so conversational. It was one more unknown that Sister Disha refused to start teaching him until that distant day she deemed him ready. One more reason he needed to succeed here.

A branch snapped nearby, pulling Roku back into the moment. He froze, straining to catch another sound or spot movement at the edge of the mist. Birds chirped. An insect buzzed as it jumped past his face. Far away, water splashed.

Nothing else.

Roku relaxed. It must have been another one of the island's mysterious creatures that were always just out of sight.

He was about to resume his search for the dragon paw fruit tree when he heard distant rumbling. He looked up. Thunder? But the sound wasn't coming from overhead—it was coming from uphill. And it was growing louder and closer, a building roar rushing down the mountainside.

As the ground beneath Roku's feet began to tremble, he squinted uphill into the fog. Then he realized what was happening.

Rockslide.

Roku swept his arms around in wide arcs, bending a sphere of fire over himself a moment before the first wave of stones burst through the fog as they rolled downhill. The barrier of heat incinerated the rocks that fell toward him, while those passing on either side tore down the mountainside, trampling and uprooting everything in their path.

Roku breathed, dug in his heels, focused his energy, and continued arcing his aching arms through the air. He may not be able to airbend or connect with his past lives or enter the Avatar State, but he knew how to bend fire to his will.

The barrier held.

After what seemed like an eternity—but was likely only a few more seconds—the thunderous rumbling began to fade and the river of rolling stones died down. Roku dropped his tired arms as the world around him settled, and his sphere of flames flickered out.

Dust hung in the air, taking several moments to clear. When it did, Roku saw nothing but dark rocks around him. Gone were the lush ferns and broad-leafed bushes and mossy trees with low-hanging branches—or any sign of green.

Shoulders tensed and fists clenched, Roku looked around. Maybe these kinds of rockslides happened often in the mountains of this island due to the constant daytime fog whose moisture must seep into the soil. Or maybe they had caught up to the Earthbenders.

"You okay over there, Roku?" Gyatso called through the mist. "It sounded like an avalanche."

"I'm okay," Roku said, as he scanned the fog. "Nothing the Avatar couldn't handle."

Gyatso appeared a few moments later, stepping lightly across the debris with his staff in hand. His concern transformed into relief when he saw Roku unharmed and smirking. "Too bad I wasn't with you," Gyatso said, "or I might have gotten another chance to use my airbending."

"I finally found you," came a deep, angry voice from uphill. A moment later, a man stepped—rather, limped—through the fog. Because even though he was built like a mountain, he was in bad shape. His helmet was

gone, and his armor was dusty, broken, and blood-soaked. One arm was in a makeshift sling, and there were several long, parallel slashes across his torso and face, as if a dragon had raked its claws across his body. And he was missing an ear.

Gyatso nudged Roku and pointed to the man's enormous feet. "The giant!" he stage-whispered.

"You caused that landslide," Roku said.

But the man ignored Roku. His gaze bored into Gyatso. "I'm going to end you."

The Airbender's face scrunched in confusion. "Wait, you're trying to kill me? Not him?"

"You're the Airbender, right?"

"Yes, but—"

The Earthbender dropped into Horse stance, then thrust his healthy arm outward and upward. Gyatso sidestepped a spear of rock that thrust upward from where he'd been standing a fraction of a second earlier.

"Wait—" Roku started to say.

The Earthbender's fist flew out toward Roku, and a rock slammed into the Avatar's stomach, sending him tumbling downhill. When he was finally able to catch himself, he rose unsteadily upon the loose stones. It didn't help that his head was spinning and his body felt like it was bruised in a hundred places.

Roku had fallen far enough that he could no longer see the Earthbender or Gyatso. But coming from within the fog uphill, he heard the rapid sound of stones bursting through the earth, telling him the Earthbender was still trying to impale the Air Nomad. Roku only hoped Gyatso could dance and dodge out of the way until he could help.

"Calm down for a minute, Mr. Giant," came Gyatso's voice. "What did I ever do to you?"

"Don't play stupid!" growled the Earthbender. "And stop dancing around!"

Roku struggled to make his way back uphill, but trying to climb the loose stones was like treading water. And the more frantic his attempts, the less progress he seemed to make.

"But I'd rather not be crushed to—argh!" Gyatso cried out as Roku heard stone strike flesh and a body thud against rocks.

“Gyatso!” Roku called as he slipped and slid a few more feet back downhill. He almost slung a blast of fire in their direction before thinking better of it, not wanting to accidentally scorch his companion.

“I’m okay!” Gyatso said. “For now!”

“Use your airbending!” Roku said.

“Gee, why didn’t I think of that?”

“Get back here!” growled the Earthbender.

Roku got an idea. “Come down to me!”

A few moments later, he heard the approaching sound of shifting rocks. Gyatso burst from the fog, backflipping and landing lightly behind Roku. The Earthbender appeared a beat later, and Roku kicked his feet out from under him. The Earthbender flew forward and skidded downhill, disappearing into the fog.

He reappeared a moment later, enraged but limping worse than before.

“Wait—” Gyatso started to say, but the Earthbender thrust his good arm up and swung it down.

Gyatso and Roku tumbled forward as the rocks underfoot receded uphill like a rug yanked away. They popped up, now standing on a swatch of exposed dirt, and Roku raised his fists—but a rumbling sound made him turn his head to see a towering stone wall bearing down on them.

Roku swept his arms around and started bending another barrier of fire as Gyatso spun his staff. Fire and air fused together above them, forming a swirling shield of amber that scattered the crashing stone.

Roku whirled back to face the Earthbender—but he was gone. “You see him?”

“No,” Gyatso answered.

They moved back-to-back and scanned the edge of the enshrouding mist.

“Your airbending worked,” Roku said, as they shifted in a slow circle.

“Your impending death really does do the trick,” Gyatso said.

“You’re welcome.”

From Roku’s left, the Earthbender shot into sight riding a colossal boulder. Roku and Gyatso dove apart as it rolled between them, then disappeared into the dense mist on the other side.

“I’m over this fog,” Roku said.

“Eh,” Gyatso said. “It keeps it interesting.”

The boulder-riding Earthbender barreled past again, narrowly missing Roku as he flipped out of the way. As he landed, Roku kicked a stream of fire at the vanishing Earthbender that was swallowed by the fog.

“Next time he comes through,” Roku said, “blow that rock out from under him.”

Gyatso nodded, took a deep breath, and held it.

A moment later, the Earthbender came tearing down the mountainside toward Gyatso. Gyatso stood his ground and blew out a gale-force wind that sent the boulder flying backward as the Earthbender hopped over Gyatso’s head. Roku swept the man’s legs the moment he landed, and his momentum sent him flying down the mountainside. He crashed into the ground, skidded into the fog, and slammed hard into something with a cracking thud. This time, he did not reappear.

Gyatso winced. “You think he’s okay?”

“He tried to kill us,” Roku said.

Gyatso shrugged and skipped away downhill. Roku followed, stumbling inelegantly down the loose rocks.

The huge man lay still on his stomach, crumpled against a cracked boulder. Gyatso held a hand under the man’s nose to check his breathing. “He’s alive. Must have hit the stone with his shoulder.”

Together, they rolled the man onto his back. His eyes were closed, his face scraped and bruised. Dried blood from his missing ear crusted along the side of his neck, but there was not the profuse bleeding from the head they had both expected to see. Together, they hoisted his giant body into a sitting position, leaning him gently back against the boulder.

“He’s Earth Kingdom, all right,” Gyatso said, examining the man’s armor.

Roku nodded. But something wasn’t right. The shell plating was a style that their army hadn’t used in decades. It seemed more like the old, secondhand military equipment mercenaries and private security guards often bought from scavengers to give others the impression that they’d seen battle.

Sozin was correct about the Earth Kingdom being on the island, but maybe it wasn’t in an official capacity. Had the Fire Nation patrol mistakenly identified the Earthbenders as soldiers, or had Sozin already

known that this was some other group? If the latter, then why had his message failed to mention as much?

This could make Roku's mission much simpler since it might not involve delicate political maneuvering. On the other hand, it could make it much more difficult depending on who these people were and why they'd come to the island.

"What is it?" Gyatso asked, catching the confusion on Roku's face.

Roku hesitated. "Nothing," he said and waited for the Earth-bender to wake up.

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ANOTHER FALSE AVATAR

The Earthbender let out a long, tortured groan as he finally began to stir a few minutes later. Slowly, the man's eyes opened. He blinked, then jolted forward as if to fight or escape—but immediately fell back, grimacing. “My shoulder . . .”

“Probably dislocated,” Gyatso said. “Want us to set it?”

“So he can try to kill us again?” Roku asked.

Gyatso pointed with his staff at the man's other arm, which was already in a makeshift sling. “He doesn't have any useable arms.”

“Let's keep it that way.”

“Are you going to kill me?” the Earthbender said through clenched teeth.

“We're going to fix your arm,” Gyatso said. “If you'll let us.”

Roku stepped forward. “*And* if you answer some questions.”

Gyatso stared at Roku. “Arm first. Then questions.”

“Questions first. Then arm. Maybe.”

“Arm.”

“Questions.”

“Arm.”

“Questions.”

“Arm,” the Earthbender chimed in. “Then we talk.”

Roku let out an exasperated sigh. “Fine.”

But Gyatso didn't move. Instead, he turned to Roku. “You know how to do this, right?”

Roku shook his head. “I thought you did.”

“Hmm.” Gyatso handed his staff to Roku and cracked his knuckles. “I'll give it a try.”

The Earthbender's face paled. “A try?”

The young Airbender moved to the man's slinged shoulder.

“The other one,” the Earthbender said, looking doubly worried.

“Right.” Gyatso moved to his other side. Holding the man’s wrist with one hand, he used his other to feel the back of the shoulder underneath his armor. “Okay. I think I can do this.”

“Think?” the Earthbender asked.

“Sit up straight.” Facing the man, Gyatso placed the hand of the injured arm on his own shoulder. Then he laid his inside hand on the elbow. With his outside hand, Gyatso began to massage the Earthbender’s injured shoulder.

“Keep breathing,” he reminded the Earthbender as he continued kneading the muscles and tendons around the joint. After a few minutes, Gyatso stopped and shifted his outside hand to the elbow while his inside hand grasped the man’s hand. Slowly, he guided the forearm outward, keeping the elbow at ninety degrees. Then he stood, straightened the man’s arm, and rotated it forward until the shoulder popped.

The Earthbender’s face instantly relaxed as he exhaled with relief.

“You should be able to move it freely in a few minutes,” Gyatso told him. “But it’s going to be sore for a while.”

The man grunted. “Thanks.”

“Impressive for your first time,” Roku told Gyatso.

Gyatso brushed his hands, took his staff from Roku, and stepped back. “Actually, it was about my dozenth. Airbenders fall a lot early in their training, so dislocations are a common-enough injury that we all learn to set them.”

Roku stifled a laugh, put on a straight face, then turned to the Earthbender. “Now — who are you?”

The Earthbender spat. “Who are *you*?”

“You said you’d talk after my friend put your arm back together.”

Gyatso smirked. “‘Friend’?”

Roku ignored him.

The man looked disgusted with himself as if he couldn’t believe he’d been bested by these two kids. “I could have done it myself,” he said, then clenched his jaw as if to hold his silence.

“Fine. Want to know who I am?” Roku cleared his throat and brought himself up to his full height. “I’m the Avatar.”

The man’s laugh came out like a bark. “And I’m the Earth King!”

Roku narrowed his eyes. “It’s true. I’m Avatar Roku.”

“Prove it.” The man looked around, picked up a pebble, and held it out in his palm. “Earthbend this, oh, great Avatar.”

Roku scratched the back of his head. “I’m still training to—”

“He really is the Avatar,” Gyatso said, sparing Roku the test he surely would have failed. Roku was about to thank him when the Airbender added, “Unfortunately.”

The Earthbender considered the two of them. “Maybe you are, maybe you aren’t. Fire and Air—that would make sense. But I hadn’t even heard the new one had been found yet.” He looked Roku over. “What are you—sixteen, I suppose? You’ve got some height. A bit of muscle. But if you really are the Avatar, you’re not much to be afraid of yet. No Kyoshi, that’s for sure.”

“Did you know her?” Roku asked, pretending to ignore the insult.

“Of course not,” the man said. “You know how many people live in the Earth Kingdom? But I certainly know enough about her that I know I wouldn’t have wanted to get on her bad side.” He evaluated Gyatso next.

“And if he’s the Avatar, that makes you . . . his airbending master?”

“I’m not his airbending master,” Gyatso said.

“He’s not my airbending master,” Roku said at the same time.

“Then one of his little companions?” the man asked as he rolled out his shoulder, testing its range of movement.

They shook their heads simultaneously.

The man raised his eyebrows.

“It’s complicated,” Roku said.

“But my name’s Gyatso. That’s straightforward.”

“Say you’re telling the truth,” the Earthbender said, “why would the Avatar—and an Airbender who is not his airbending master—come all the way out to this scrap of a foggy island?”

Roku cleared his throat and tried to speak with some gravitas. “I received word that the Earth Kingdom Army had claimed one of the Fire Nation’s islands, so we came to resolve the issue peacefully.”

“Peacefully?” the man scoffed. “You murdered two of my companions last moon. We found their scorched bodies in the forest. And you,” he glared at Gyatso, “tried to take my life by the waterfalls a few days ago. Or have you already forgotten?”

Roku and Gyatso exchanged confused glances.

“I didn’t kill anyone,” Roku said.

“And I never attacked you,” Gyatso said.

“We’ve been following your trail,” Roku explained, “trying to catch up so we could talk about what I’m starting to think is a giant misunderstanding.”

The Earthbender regarded Roku and Gyatso with a skeptical gaze, trying to gauge if they were telling the truth. Roku remembered Sozin once telling him that there were legends of Earthbenders so skilled at sensing seismic vibrations that they could tell if someone was lying by the way their heart rate or breathing changed. Unfortunately, this man’s earthbending—all rockslides and boulders and stone walls—seemed too dependent on brute force for such a refined application.

“If it wasn’t you,” the Earthbender said, still suspicious, “then who was it?”

Ta Min had said that the Fire Nation patrol had encountered the Earth Kingdom military on the island. Sozin hadn’t given her any other details, but it was possible there had been a fight that had led to the deaths of the man’s two companions. But Roku wasn’t about to say as much right now, especially since he didn’t know enough about what had transpired. This misunderstanding didn’t need any additional layers. Instead, he offered another detail from Sozin’s message.

“A small, uncontacted clan lives on the island,” Roku said. “Maybe it was them.”

“And you’re mistaken about an Airbender trying to kill you,” Gyatso added. “None of us would do that—we’re pacifists.”

The man pointed to the bloody side of his head. “Did I imagine the air current that sliced through the mist and cleaved my ear clean off?” Then he gestured vaguely at his other lacerations. “Or the others that came after like a dozen invisible throwing knives, splitting my armor and carving up my face?” He touched the tattered sling. “And I suppose it was a spirit that then flung me into the air so high that I broke an arm and got knocked unconscious when I fell?”

“Maybe?” Gyatso ventured. Then he turned and jabbed Roku in the chest with the point of his staff. “You’re not very good at this—we’re supposed to be asking the questions.”

“It wasn’t us,” Roku said to the Earthbender, brushing the staff away. “We’ve told you who we are and why we’re here. Now it’s your turn to talk.”

The Earthbender shifted, grunting from the pain. “I’m Oh Wen. Private security guard for the Western Kingdom Trading Company.”

Roku noticed Gyatso stiffen. “What?”

Gyatso looked like he wanted to say something but simply shook his head.

Roku returned his attention to the Earthbender supposedly named Oh Wen. “So, the Western Kingdom Trading Company?” He was familiar with the organization, which did business all around the South Sea, including with Roku’s clan. That business, however, should not have included unauthorized landings. “Why is an Earth Kingdom company trespassing on Fire Nation territory?”

“Ah, so you’re here on behalf of the Fire Nation,” said Oh Wen.

“No,” Gyatso said as Roku said, “Yes.”

“Which is it?”

Gyatso gestured for Roku to clarify.

“Just answer the question,” said the Avatar.

Oh Wen sighed.

“To be honest, I don’t really care. We were sent here to find something. And the company told us the island was unclaimed and uninhabited.”

“What were you sent to find?”

“Some kind of rock.”

“Some kind of rock?”

Oh Wen nodded.

“Coal? Iron ore?” Roku asked, on the verge of vindication. After all, when Ta Min had first shared Sozin’s request, he had figured it was more likely the Earth Kingdom had come to steal resources than territory. And that would make even more sense if the Earthbender was telling the truth about whom he worked for. Even if the company was sent by the Earth King, if they were caught, the monarch would have plausible deniability by being able to claim that their activities were unsanctioned.

But Oh Wen shook his head. “Some rare kind of stone or mineral or crystal—I don’t know much about it. Just that it’s special and only found on this island.”

Gyatso tried to catch Roku's eye, but Roku kept his gaze focused on the Earthbender, searching for any signs that he might be lying. "What's so special about it?"

"It's worth twice its weight in platinum."

"Okay. But *why* is it worth so much?"

"I don't know," Oh Wen said.

"I'm a guard. You think they tell me anything? The two Earthbenders we were assigned to protect—a mother and daughter—they're the experts."

Gyatso tugged on Roku's robes. "Can we talk over there for a moment, Roku?" Gyatso asked.

Again, Roku ignored him. "And where are they now?"

"You mean you didn't kill the rest of my group?"

Roku threw his hands up. "For the last time, we didn't kill anyone!"

Gyatso pointed at himself. "Pacifist."

"Then I don't know. They were long gone by the time I woke up after that Airbender tossed me like a rag doll. They probably figured I was dead and continued with the expedition, and I was in no state to chase after them."

"How long ago was that?"

"The day before last."

Roku turned to Gyatso. "Then we can probably catch up to them by nightfall at the rate we've been moving."

"Thanks to the path we cleared for you," Oh Wen said.

"Roku," Gyatso interjected, more forcefully this time. "We need to talk."

"We are talking."

"Privately."

Roku was about to dismiss Gyatso again, but he finally saw the urgency in the young Airbender's eyes. "Fine." He pointed to Oh Wen. "You stay there."

"As the Avatar wishes." Oh Wen chuckled and offered a mock bow while still seated. "Ha. Kid thinks he's the Avatar . . ."

Gyatso and Roku walked until Oh Wen was at the edge of the fog, then they angled their bodies away.

"You think he's telling the truth?" Roku asked.

“I do,” Gyatso whispered. “But remember when I said that maybe Sozin wasn’t telling you everything?”

Roku nodded, tensing.

“What if he knows about this ‘special’ resource?”

Roku said nothing.

“Maybe *that’s* the real reason Sozin asked for your help—he wanted you to quietly clear the Earth Kingdom out so he could have it for himself.”

“If there is such a resource on this island, then it belongs to the Fire Nation, and he has a duty to protect it,” Roku said and started to turn away.

Gyatso gripped him by the shoulder. “Then why lie to the Avatar?”

Roku pulled Gyatso’s hand off. “Sozin wouldn’t lie to me,” he said, choosing to believe as much.

“Sure. But have you ever considered the possibility that . . . he totally would lie to you?”

Roku clenched his fists, his irritation crystallizing into anger. “Maybe he was mistaken about why the Earth Kingdom came here,” he allowed, hoping it would shut up the Airbender.

But Gyatso wouldn’t let it go. “Come on. Sozin asks you to get rid of the Earth Kingdom, and then we find out there’s some super rare rock or mineral on the island? If you ask me, that can’t be a coincidence.”

“I didn’t ask you,” Roku said more harshly than he intended.

Hurt crossed Gyatso’s face. Then frustration. “I didn’t want to say anything about it, but let me guess: It hasn’t occurred to you that the Earthbender who attacked you and Ta Min might not have really been sent by the Earth King?”

Roku let out a derisive laugh. “I suppose you think the evil Prince Sozin sent him.”

“It makes sense,” Gyatso said. “You had already said you wouldn’t help him, and that attack changed your mind.”

Could that be true? Had Sozin—and Ta Min—played him?

No.

“It does *not* make sense,” Roku said. “That guy nearly killed us. If he had, then there would have been no Avatar to help Prince Sozin carry out his nefarious scheme.” Roku shook his head and repeated, “Sozin wouldn’t lie to me. And he definitely wouldn’t ever try to have me killed. We’re—”

“—Friends,” Gyatso finished. “I know. But the thing is, you *were* friends. You’re the Avatar now. Don’t you see how that changes things?”

“It changes nothing.”

“Spirits above,” Gyatso muttered to himself.

Roku searched his mind for a stronger counterargument. “If you’re right, then wouldn’t he know I’d eventually find out about the resource when I spoke to the Earth Kingdom?”

“He probably didn’t think they’d tell you about it.”

Roku jammed a thumb in the air toward Oh Wen. “Well, that guy just told me about it.”

“If I weren’t here to help him with his arm, he wouldn’t have told you anything. In fact, if I weren’t here, he would have ground you to dust.”

Roku poked Gyatso in the center of his chest. “Maybe *you* should be Avatar, then.”

“It definitely shouldn’t have been you.” Gyatso returned the chest poke. “Sister Disha was right.”

Roku opened his mouth to fire back, but his anger faltered, flickered. He had always suspected his airbending master thought he wasn’t good enough to be the Avatar, but to hear it confirmed was like losing an Agni Kai in front of everyone he loved and respected.

“Forget it,” Gyatso said after a beat, “let’s help this guy back to his ship, sail out of the fog, and find Lola.”

“Why would we do that?”

Gyatso tapped Roku’s head with his staff. “Did that fall knock something loose in there? We need to get back to the Southern Air Temple.”

“What about that resource?” Roku asked.

“What about it?”

“If it really is here and if it really is that valuable, we can’t just step aside and let the Earth Kingdom take it.”

Gyatso scoffed. “Because it belongs to the Fire Nation?”

“Because who knows what the Earth Kingdom would use it for.”

Gyatso shook his head. “That’s not our concern. None of this should have ever been our concern—it was a mistake to come. Once we get back, we can tell Abbot Rabten and Sister Disha what Oh Wen told us, and they can decide what to do.”

“What about your airbending?” Roku tried once again.

“It isn’t worth it.”

“You don’t mean that.”

Gyatso didn’t answer.

“How about the rest of his group?” Roku interrupted, reaching for a moral argument that might sway the Air Nomad. “If there really are some murderous natives tracking them through the forest, do you want to just leave them to die?”

But Roku miscalculated.

“Greed always has its price,” Gyatso said and turned away.

The stone-cold response took Roku aback. “That’s not very Air Nomad of you.”

Gyatso spun back around. “Hard to hear since you’re just like them, eh? Different nation, same story.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re just another noble who doesn’t care about all the commoners who farmed the crops or mined the ore or sailed the ships or felled the trees or worked the mills that made your clan rich. All that suffering means nothing to you. You sip your tea, attend your academy and your festivals, relax in your Royal Spas, and complain about the price of silk. If others have to go without so that you can have more more more, then so be it, right?”

The Air Nomad’s sudden rage left Roku stunned. It was as if Gyatso had stabbed him with a blade he’d long been sharpening in secret.

But Gyatso wasn’t done.

“Before Kyoshi was identified as the Avatar,” he went on, “she was an orphan, a servant. She fought for justice because she could recognize injustice. She experienced it firsthand. She survived it. Her heart was always with the poor, the broken, the oppressed. That’s why she was a great Avatar. You? You—your family, your clan, your nation—*are* the oppressor. What can you offer as Avatar when you can’t even understand that?”

Roku still didn’t know what to say.

“Do what you want,” Gyatso tossed over his shoulder as he walked away.

“Fine,” said Roku, feeling like a tree that had survived a typhoon but had been stripped of every branch. He crossed his arms. “I don’t need any

more help from some failed Airbender, anyway.”

“And I don’t need to waste my energy helping some brainwashed Firebender who’s going to turn out to be another False Avatar.”

Hurt and wanting to hurt, Roku turned away as well. Gyatso was indeed a far cry from Sozin, who would never give up like that, never walk away from Roku like that.

No matter what.

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CONTROL

Anyone with half a brain could tell the Sandbenders Sozin had hired to take Kozaru, Dalisay, and him to Wan Shi Tong's library were going to attempt to rob them. The only question was if the Sandbenders planned to kill them too.

It was a common-enough ruse hatched from the minds of desperate criminals all over the world. Back home in the Fire Nation, it took the form of poor fishermen on the outer islands offering to ferry nobles on vacation to remote, private beaches—only to take their belongings and leave them stranded. Sozin couldn't fault anyone for doing what they must to survive. So long as there was poverty, criminality was inevitable. To make his people feel safe, he'd eventually have to find ways to ensure the nation's resources served every single Fire National, not only the nobles. But in the meantime, illegal activity must be punished. Such was the bedrock of civilization—a truth that had always escaped the Earth Kingdom.

So, when one of the Sandbenders looked over his shoulder as he guided their sand-sailer across the dunes to tell Sozin that they were going stop at a rock formation up ahead to pass high noon in the shade, Sozin simply nodded. Then he discreetly nudged Kozaru and Dalisay. His two companions sat up casually, but their eyes grew alert, their muscles tense.

They had left yesterday at sunset, then traveled through the night to escape the heat. But now, the temperature was rapidly growing unbearable as the sun climbed—especially under all the extra layers of cloth they wore wrapped around their faces and hands in the Sandbender style to protect their skin from the sun's rays. The desert's rolling dunes stretched in every direction under an expansive blue dome streaked low across the horizon with the barest wisps of clouds. Far overhead, buzzard-wasps circled.

But what would the Sandbenders' play be, exactly? Perhaps they'd insist Sozin, Kozaru, and Dalisay hop off the skiff first, then immediately sail away. Or maybe they'd wait until Sozin and his companions sat down in the shade and tucked into their lunch.

No, these two weren't working alone. Most likely, their low-life friends were lying in wait at this rock formation, ready to use their sandbending to subdue and rob and maybe even kill.

Yes, Sozin thought, that's what he would do.

After some time, the rock formation came into view on the horizon. It was a towering collection of jagged slats of dusky stone that jutted out of the earth at sharp angles. Scruffy shrubs sprayed with tiny pale green leaves sprouted in the shallow patches of sand around the base of the formation. Between the rocks, there were plenty of shadowed nooks in which a person could seek refuge from the unrelenting sun.

The Sandbenders ceased their bending motions, and the skiff slid to a rest a few feet short of the rocks, quieting the rushing white noise of outriggers cutting through sand. Sozin and his companions exchanged guarded glances as they stood and stretched.

"We'll break here," the other Sandbender said as they began to lower and furl the sail. "Lunch. Rest. Then, when our shadows reach half-height, continue on our way."

"Great plan." Sozin hopped down, Kozaru and Dalisay following.

It was anyone's guess how many Sandbenders comprised the teeth of this blatant trap. But Sozin wasn't worried in the least even if they were surrounded by sand. The two that had guided the sand-sailer might have been able to figure out Sozin and his companions were Fire Nation by the way they spoke or carried themselves, but they didn't know he and Kozaru were Firebenders—at their strongest when the sun was at its highest—and that Dalisay was nearly as deadly with her rope dart.

The two Sandbenders made quick work of winding and knotting ropes, then slung their satchels over their shoulders and climbed down. One gestured past Sozin at a wide, shadowed crevice between two of the tallest angled stones ahead of them. "In there."

Sozin raised his eyebrows at Kozaru and Dal, as if to say, *Could this be any more obvious?*

The dry heat was suffocating. He unwound the cloth he'd wrapped around his face and removed the leather strap with slits for eye holes that the Sandbenders had given them to shield their sight from the blinding desert light. Squinting against the brightness, he scanned the looming rocks as they treaded forward. No movement. No errant shadows. Either the other

Sandbenders were concealed behind the peaks or in the darkness within the crevice.

As they approached the entrance, Sozin whispered to Kozaru, “Wait here. Watch our backs.”

Kozaru nodded and lingered as Sozin, Dalisay, and the two Sandbenders proceeded.

Coolness hit as soon as they stepped into the shadows, but the sudden change in lighting made it difficult to see in the darkness. Which is why the moment he heard footsteps approach from within, Sozin used his firebending to produce a length of fire from each fist that he lashed forward like two blazing whips. The flames lit up the passageway, revealing four Sandbenders waiting with swords or daggers. They shouted in surprise as they leapt back, their weapons clattering to the ground.

One of the Sandbenders who had been walking alongside them began to shout at Sozin. But Dalisay’s rope dart swung through the air, wrapped around his neck, and tugged him down. She yanked back, and the man’s body flipped as the rope unwound, returned to her, then was redirected with a graceful spinning kick toward the other Sandbender who screamed in pain as the dart lodged into her upper thigh.

While Dalisay dealt with those two, Sozin cocked his arms and snapped his fire whips forward again, extending their length so they didn’t come up short this time. They sailed through the narrow dark and each cracked against a different Sandbender, sizzling as they singed cloth and flesh.

“Please!” begged one of the other Sandbenders—an old man—as he rushed toward Sozin with hands up. “Please don’t hurt my husband!”

Sozin pulled back to gather his whips to strike the geriatric attacker when something on the ground glinted in the light of the passing flames. Not swords, not daggers. Teacups.

Copper teacups. A tray. Scattered cutlery.

Sozin dropped his arms. Let the flames dissipate.

These people weren’t thieves—they were servants, waiting with refreshments to replenish the travelers on their journey.

“Wait,” Sozin ordered Dalisay, whose lethal dart was still cutting through the air in expert arcs.

Dalisay landed through a spin and let her rope wind around her forearm as Kozaru came jogging up, face falling in disappointment as she realized

the fight was over before she had a chance to join it.

“There’s been a misunderstanding.” Sozin lit a flame that illuminated the scattered tea service. Then he turned to the two groaning Sandbenders whom Dal had been fighting. One was leaning back against the rock as she clutched a bleeding thigh, the other lay writhing on the dusty ground. He felt bad, but he wasn’t about to show it. “You really should have told us about your friends.”



The next morning, they arrived at Wan Shi Tong’s library. It was real. Half-buried in the middle of some spirits-forsaken desert, but real.

Its domed spires reached through the sand and into the sky with stunning symmetry. Four tall, narrow turrets on the outside corners framed four smaller, wider ones in the middle. At the center rose the tallest tower sprouting from a vast dome. The sand level reached a few feet below the central dome’s base, almost entirely covering a row of intricately crafted high windows. Another hundred years and the entire place would likely be covered by the desert.

Sozin could not stop grinning. He wished Fire Lord Taiso were here to see it. “You were wrong,” he would have told his father, who would have then admitted as much before apologizing for dismissing the spirit owl’s collection as mere legend.

Okay—Fire Lord Taiso would never admit he was wrong. And he certainly would never apologize. Especially to his son. At most he’d have a sour look on his face—which Sozin may still get to see when he returned home and shared a trove of new knowledge, knowledge that would certainly give the Fire Nation an edge for decades, if not centuries, to come. His father may even stop bothering Sozin about continuing his studies and start giving him some real responsibilities.

Sozin handed their injured Sandbender guides double the agreed upon payment—an apology that didn’t require explicit admission of fault. “And I’ll double the other half too, after you take us back to the oasis.” Then he turned to Kozaru and Dal. “Wait with our friends so they’re not tempted to sail away out of spite for that earlier misunderstanding.”

Kozaru nodded dutifully, but Dalisay crossed her arms. “We come all this way with you, and you’re not even going to let us go in?”

“Precisely,” Sozin said.

It was possible the Sandbenders might have been hoping to ditch them for real this time, but Sozin didn't think it likely. More so, it was a convenient excuse. He wanted Kozaru and Dalisay to wait outside because he didn't trust them—Dalisay in particular. As a scientist, she was too curious. Whatever useful information there was inside the library was his to discover, his to possess, his to control.

Dalisay started to protest, but Sozin cut her with a glare meant to remind her of her place. She huffed, then sat down on the edge of the skiff. "But remember to look for anything about metallurgy. If we can find—"

"Yes, yes, I know," Sozin said, interrupting her with a dismissive wave. He gathered his things, hopped off the sand-sailer, and treaded through the sand toward the library, toward his future, which with each step burned brighter than the sun overhead.

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A MUTUAL EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION

With each tree Malaya and Kilat passed on their way to Amihan and the Earthbenders, Malaya felt more and more disturbed. She was certain the Airbender would be more than glad to carry out the task alone, but Malaya couldn't shake the thought that whatever happened would be her fault. To deliver Ulo's orders would be to deliver the killing blow.

No matter how much she repeated the clan chief's claims to herself, she couldn't shake the sense that the Earthbenders did not deserve to die. They had done nothing wrong except come to an island they likely didn't know was inhabited.

When Kilat stopped to rest by a stream, Malaya did not urge the gorilla-tarsier on. Instead, she dismounted and knelt by the flowing water.

Despite her misgivings, what choice did she have? Ulo had ordered it, and Ulo's word was final. He had kept the clan safe and protected so far, hadn't he? And even if she wanted to disobey, he'd already given her a glimpse of how powerless she was in the face of his waterbending.

The best she could do was ensure that when the time came, they met their end as painlessly as possible. She knew of several poisonous berries and fungi that would be more merciful than whatever Amihan would surely do to them.

Malaya filled her cupped hands in the stream, drank the cool water, and splashed her face. She raised her eyes to the surrounding forest as if it might offer some reassuring wisdom.

And in a way, it did.

For scuttling up the trunk of a tree at the fog's edge was a bright red insect—a basilisk-centipede the length of her hand. Hard to find, even harder to catch. When threatened, it excreted a poisonous slime that paralyzed potential predators. Malaya had learned this the hard way the first time she had come upon one crawling through the forest and picked it up. Every muscle in her body had gone as rigid as stone. A couple hours passed before she'd been able to move again.

Malaya nocked an arrow, aimed, and released. The arrow whistled through the air and sunk into the tree, pinning the creature in place. She ran over, pulled out the arrow with the insect skewered at its end, and carried it back to the stream. Working carefully, she split its belly open with her dagger and sifted through its organs with the tip of the blade until she found the beaded glands that stored its poison.



Malaya left Kilat with Amihan's gorilla-tarsier at the tree line below the rocky slopes of the eastern mountains and proceeded by foot. The fog was thinner and cooler at this elevation, drifting swiftly through the air. Scattered, windswept brush and clusters of stones clung to the ridge that connected the peaks like a row of jagged teeth and led all the way to the island's dormant volcano in the north.

She found Amihan crouching behind a rocky outcropping below the ridge's saddle and a dozen paces off the path. The Earthbenders were out of sight, but she could hear them making their way down.

"About time," Amihan said quietly as Malaya joined her. Then, with a smug smile, she asked, "I was right, yeah?"

Malaya sighed. Nodded. Handed over one of the ripe bananas she'd gathered on the way.

Amihan took the fruit without saying thanks and started to peel it. "You'll get used to it. It's just like hunting or trapping—only our quarry can speak."

"And feel."

"Oh, most living things can probably feel." Amihan bit into the fruit.

"That's comforting."

Amihan shrugged. Through a mouthful of banana, she said, "It's only too bad you're so slow. If you returned soon enough to catch them on the ridge where the wind is the strongest, I could have just—*whoosh—splat.*" She sighed. "That would have made things much simpler. Now, we might have to—"

Amihan stopped midsentence. Her eyes went wide with panic and her entire body froze.

"Ami, are you okay?" Malaya said, trying to sound genuinely surprised and concerned. "What's wrong?" She touched the Airbender's shoulder to

find all the muscles hardened with tension. “Oh, no—I think that banana was bad. I’ll get help!”

Malaya rushed away in the direction of the gorilla-tarsiers, very aware of what was wrong with the fruit—she had injected it with a trace amount of the basilisk-centipede’s poison.

Before reaching the tree line, she circled back around in a wide enough arc that she was certain nobody would hear her approach. When she caught up to the Earthbenders, she was relieved to find the mother and daughter at the rear of the group. They had stopped to examine the inside of a stone one of them had probably split with earthbending.

“Look at the red sheen on these black striations! So unusual among all this basalt,” the mother was telling the daughter as Malaya slowly entered their field of view, hands up and weapons sheathed.

The younger woman noticed Malaya first and nudged her mother. Malaya stopped about three paces away.

“It’s you,” the older woman said, trying to conceal her surprise and fear. “From the waterfalls.”

“Please, don’t call your guards,” Malaya said quickly and softly, palms still out, heart still hammering. She took a deep breath, hoping the guards were far enough ahead to be out of earshot. “I’m not going to hurt you.” She gestured toward herself. “I’m Malaya.”

The daughter looked to her mother, who watched Malaya as if she were a dangerous creature. But neither of them called for the guards.

“You’re one of the natives?” the daughter asked, looking Malaya over in a way that made Malaya suddenly self-conscious about her bare feet and exposed skin. “Before you attacked us the other day, we didn’t think anyone lived here.”

“It wasn’t meant to be an attack—we were only trying to take your things so you’d leave the island.”

The mother set down the split rock she’d been examining and stepped in front of her daughter. “But you killed three of our guards.”

Malaya shook her head, hands still up. “We didn’t kill your guards.” Which was mostly true. The first two had disappeared before she had even discovered their group. As for the other one—she wasn’t certain what Amihan had done to him.

The daughter looked to the mother again, who was weighing Malaya's words. After a moment, the mother asked, "Malaya, was it?"

Malaya nodded.

"I'm Yuming, and this is my daughter, Qixia . . . Why do you want us to leave the island?"

"It's not safe for you here."

"Why not?"

Malaya considered how much to reveal. "This island belongs to our clan."

The daughter, Qixia, peeked out from behind her mother, Yuming. "'Clan'?" Her eyes went to Malaya's short hair for some reason. "You're Fire Nation?"

"We don't belong to any nation," Malaya corrected. "We just want to live in peace. Please, speak with the rest of your group—convince them to leave immediately."

Malaya's request was met with silence. Malaya could tell from Yuming's eyes that the older woman was trying to decide what to say or do next. Finally, Yuming took a cautious step forward.

"If you could take us to your . . . what term do you use—'Matriarch'? 'Lord'? 'Chieftain'? Whoever's in charge of your clan—if I could speak with them, I'm sure they'll see we're no threat. We came here to learn about your island, and your people must be curious about the rest of the world. A mutual exchange of information could prove enlightening for all of us. Imagine what we could gain from each other."

Malaya wished it were that simple. It should be that simple. "I'm sorry."

Disappointment clouded Yuming's face. "Thank you for your warning, but it took me years to discover the location of your island and then months of sailing around the South Sea to actually find it. Three men have already lost their lives in the process. You must understand that we can't leave now."

Malaya clenched her jaw. This wasn't going the way she thought it would. Why wouldn't they listen to her? Why were they so determined to stay when she'd made it clear they were not welcome?

"What we've already learned here is enough to fill dozens of scrolls," Qixia added. "Do you know how much of your flora and fauna exist only on this island?"

Malaya nodded, having spent much time eavesdropping on their conversations.

Yuming's expression softened and she took another step forward, lifting her hands as if for an embrace. "Stay with us. Be our guide. Show us your home."

As much as Malaya would have wanted to, she wanted Yuming and Qixia and their companions to live. "Let me be clear." Malaya pointed at the fog in the direction of Amihan's paralyzed body. "There's someone behind the rocks just off the trail up ahead. Our chief has ordered her to take your lives."

Both mother and daughter whipped their heads in the direction Malaya had indicated, as if Amihan was going to materialize out of the mist that very moment. When she didn't, Yuming turned back around. It was clear from her face she took the threat as a bluff. "You're just trying to scare us."

"I promise I'm not."

"We have our guards."

"They wouldn't stand a chance."

Again, Yuming took a moment to consider her options. "Why are your people so intent on keeping outsiders away?" she asked.

Malaya hesitated. Neither reason nor threats had worked. So Malaya decided to try honesty. "Because of Yungib," she said, wondering if this was the first time in history that name had been spoken to outsiders. "The cave spirit. It is our clan's duty to protect the spirit—at any cost."

But the way both women's eyes brightened at this new information made it obvious Malaya's last-ditch effort to dissuade them from continuing their exploration had failed.

Yuming took another cautious step forward, and she was only a pace away from Malaya now. "Can we meet Yungib?" Yuming asked carefully, as if trying to step through a flock of flighty birds without scattering them to the sky.

Malaya shook her head, growing frustrated at the woman's steadfast refusal to listen. Malaya had felt she'd only needed to speak to the woman, but she was running out of things to say.

"Hmm." Yuming exchanged yet another glance with her daughter, something unspoken passing between them. Then she took one more step forward and reached for Malaya's hands. Malaya pulled them away.

“It’s okay,” Yuming said, and slowly reached out again.

This time, Malaya let her. The woman’s hands were warm and soft, the pads of her fingers uncalled. She looked straight into Malaya’s eyes. “Please, Malaya, will you be our guide?” She paused again. “Lead us to your village.” Pause. “Introduce us to your chief.” Another pause. “Let us meet the cave spirit.”

Malaya’s own mother was all hard edges. Every sentence barbed with disappointment, every gaze sharpened with judgment. She had never held or looked at or spoken to Malaya with half as much softness as Yuming. Malaya was so taken by the sudden intimacy they shared that she almost said yes.

“I’m sorry,” Malaya said. “I can’t.”

Yuming exhaled—and stepped back. As she did, Qixia slid one foot forward and clapped her hands together. In the blink of an eye, rock fragments rose from the ground then flew to Malaya’s hands, binding them together before she could react.

Then Qixia flicked her wrists, and hardened earth encased Malaya’s legs up to the knee, anchoring Malaya in place.

Malaya bared her teeth and struggled against her restraints like a trapped animal. Qixia looked away.

“I’m sorry too,” Yuming said as she regarded Malaya with the kind of maternal disappointment with which Malaya was much more familiar. “We’ve come too far.”

With that, Yuming and Qixia disappeared into the fog, leaving Malaya stuck to the mountainside, seething at their betrayal.

ROKU, ALONE

Roku did not stop. He pushed through exhaustion. He moved through thirst and hunger. He trudged through streams, scrambled over roots and rocks and downed trees. If Oh Wen was to be believed and the rest of his group really had been attacked only a couple days ago, then Roku could catch up with them soon enough if he did not stop to rest. He could protect them from the island's dangerous inhabitants and then persuade them to leave in peace.

He could prove Gyatso and Sister Disha—and himself—wrong. He was not a mistake.

He was the Avatar.

Switchbacks snaked back and forth as the path climbed. The moss-covered trees thinned, shrank, gave way to waist-high, windswept shrubs and clumps of spiky grasses that sprouted low along the increasingly rocky ground. The wind picked up and the ever-silent, ever-present mist slid past more quickly the higher he went.

Eventually, Roku couldn't climb any higher—he'd reached what seemed like the summit. Out of breath and legs burning, he wiped the sweat from his face and peered downhill. The terrain on the other side of the mountain was as rocky and as scruffy as what he'd just climbed but much steeper.

Then the fog began to lift in the way Roku had come to learn meant sunset. Perhaps as a coincidence of his vantage point and the exact time of day and the fact the sky was overcast, he could see farther than he'd yet been able to on the island. Apparently, he was standing not quite on a peak but a ridge. To the north and south: the rest of the ridge reaching like a row of jagged teeth silhouetted against the horizon. To the west: a steep descent into dense forest with the narrow scar where the trail resumed. To the east: the way he'd come, the cove and the sea beyond, above which hung a starless sky.

The air was as warm and humid as ever, but tonight it carried the sweet scent of rain. Roku had only started his descent when the first drops fell.



“Come on, Ro, what are you afraid of?” Yasu called from up ahead. He stood at the edge of the beach, flame in hand, while Roku hung back with his own light on the low bluffs among the seagrass. The breeze smelled of sand and sea. The waves crashed in the darkness up ahead. Behind them loomed the dark form of the caldera’s steep, sloping outer wall.

“It looks like rain,” Roku said, holding his hand open palm out to feel for drops.

Yasu considered the clouds that covered the night sky, blotting out the stars. “You plan to stay dry while we swim?”

Roku sighed, then slid down the sandy bluff and joined his twin brother. As they’d done a hundred times before, they split up and scoured the beach for driftwood, working silently. A few minutes later, they came back together, piled the bleached logs like a tent, and used their firebending to set it aflame. The dried-out wood caught quickly, radiating a burst of light and heat.

“Too bad Sozin couldn’t come,” Yasu said as he stripped down to his undergarments, then tossed his sleeping robes aside. Their friend was on lockdown after incinerating a few centuries-old tapestries at the Academy while attempting to teach himself to firebend blue flames.

“Yeah,” Roku said as he took off his own robes and folded them into a neat pile. “Too bad.”

In truth, however, Roku wasn’t all that disappointed. It’s not that he didn’t like Sozin, it’s just that he and Yasu hardly ever spent any real time together anymore.

For the first ten years of their lives, Roku and Yasu had lived under the same roof, shared the same meals, experienced the same family drama. As much time as they spent with Sozin during the day, they always returned home together. But that connection ended last year when they entered the Royal Fire Academy for Boys. Now, they lived and ate and studied and learned alongside hundreds of other young Firebenders-in-training.

In their rare moments of down time, Yasu began to go to Sozin more often than to Roku. So when Sozin and Yasu sparred, Roku studied. When

Sozin and Yasu played Pai Sho together, Roku went to the theater. When Sozin and Yasu snuck out to talk to girls, Roku stayed in bed.

They were leaving him behind.

Which is why when Yasu had asked if Roku wanted to sneak out of the Academy for a night swim to see the bioluminescent algae, Roku had lit up at the invitation and immediately said yes.

But now, in the glow of the bonfire, a light rain starting to fall and high waves breaking close to shore, nervousness settled into his gut.

Yasu tied his hair up into a tight bun, then clapped Roku on the back. "Let's go, Ro!"

Roku hesitated. "I don't know if this is a good idea, Ya."

"Don't tell me you're pig-chickening out on me . . ."

Roku scratched the back of his neck. "The waves are huge tonight. And I'm not as strong a swimmer as you are."

"True," Yasu said as he stepped into the water. "But you think you'll get stronger standing on the shore?"

"What if someone at the Academy notices that we're gone?"

Yasu turned around, the water slapping at his thighs. "We've snuck out dozens of nights and haven't been caught once. Besides, we're already here. If this turns out to be the first time we're disciplined, it may as well be worth it."

"I don't even see the algae. Are you sure it's tonight?"

Yasu shrugged.

Casting for excuses, Roku scanned the overcast horizon for flashes of lightning. But the sky remained dark, the light rain a drizzle.

He sighed and followed his brother into the churning, pleasantly warm water.



The glimpse of the island afforded by the half-light of dusk was short-lived, and within seconds it was too dark to see. Roku lit a flame in his palm and started to follow the Earth-benders' trail down the other side of the mountain. As the rain picked up, however, the trail grew muddy, and he had to slow down.

It wasn't long before he came across several fragments of stone, which seemed out of place among the darker rocks. When Roku gathered the

pieces, he noticed that they fit together neatly like a puzzle, revealing a cavity in the shape of clasped hands. And nearby was another set of fragments whose cavity suggested the bottom half of someone's legs. One of the Earthbenders must have bound someone's hands and feet, and that person must have managed to break free. Meaning, Oh Wen's group was somewhere ahead—and they were still in danger.

Meaning, he could still save them.

Roku picked up his pace.



Waves crashed against Roku's knees, knocked him back, tugged his body toward the open sea as they receded. The deeper he went, the stronger the water's push and pull. Still, Roku stood his ground, took the hits, and treaded toward Yasu.

"Here comes a big one!" Yasu called over the slow rush of gathering water.

The wave slammed into Yasu—then Roku a few moments later—knocking them both underwater. They resurfaced within seconds of each other, laughing as they pushed their long hair out of their faces and spit up salt water that made their lips tingle.

As their laughter subsided, Roku looked back at the bonfire on the beach, surprised at how distant it seemed. "We're pretty far out—maybe we should go back."

Yasu shook his head and pushed forward. "I want to make it to the sandbar."

"I think the sandbar's farther south," Roku said. Rain drops rippled across the water's surface.

"Didn't you get lost in the Academy's library last week?" Yasu asked, Roku's lack of a sense of direction a running joke between them.

"They rearranged it," Roku said. "But, really, we should go back, Ya."

"Go on," Yasu said. "I'll send up some flames when I've reached the sandbar that is definitely here and not farther south." He began to swim.

Roku bobbed in the water, barely tall enough for his feet to reach the sand. From up ahead came the sound of another slow building wave. It kept building, and soon, the retreating water lowered to Roku's waist, then his knees, then his ankles.

“Be careful!” he called after his brother.

“Okay, Mother!” Yasu responded, took a deep breath, then ducked under the surface as the wave broke.

The rolling whitecaps struck Roku a few moments later, knocking him back with unbelievable force and sending him tumbling violently under the water so much so that he didn’t know which way was up. Several seconds passed before the churning calmed enough that he could get his feet back under him. Roku wasn’t laughing when he broke the surface this time and found himself far from where he’d been moments ago. He wiped the water from his eyes and scanned the spot where his brother’s head had been bobbing. “Yasu?”

Except for the roiling sea and falling rain, the night was quiet.

The silence stretched on as Roku listened for a response that never came.

“Yasu?” Roku called again, heart starting to pound, a terrible feeling settling into his gut. “Are you out there?”

Nothing.

“Stop playing around!”

It wouldn’t be the first time Yasu dove, disappeared for several moments, then popped up next to Roku and tried to shove his head under water.

But Yasu still did not reappear. A lump formed in Roku’s throat. His eyes, stinging from the salt, welled with tears. He started to hyperventilate as panic threatened to overtake him like a swarm of buzzard-wasps.

What should he do? Wait and keep listening? Swim farther out and risk the waves? Return to shore and run for help? This was a waking nightmare, and Roku was paralyzed with indecision.

Another wave hit him, breaking the spell. When it passed, Roku spat, took a deep breath, pushed through, swam as hard as he could toward where he thought his brother had been. When he reached the area, he treaded water as he swiveled around and searched for any sign of Yasu as he called his brother’s name.

But there was nothing.

His brother was a strong swimmer—maybe when the wave hit, it had pulled Yasu under and he had hit his head on a chunk of coral and been knocked unconscious. So, after screaming his brother’s name a few more

times to no response, Roku started diving. He swept his hands through the water, parting it with surprising force as he cast blindly about for Yasu. When he ran out of air, he resurfaced, screamed Yasu's name, listened for a beat, dove again.

Roku dove so many times he lost track of where he was, lost track of the bonfire and the beach. He lost track of time, of how many more waves tried to bury him. Nothing existed except the knowledge that his brother—the other part of himself—was floating or sinking somewhere in the watery darkness.

Before he realized it, Roku's arms grew too tired to paddle, his legs too exhausted to kick, his lungs too empty to breathe. The next time he surfaced, he tried to gather his strength for one more dive—but he had nothing left.

Suddenly, he knew that he would drown if he did not head back to shore now.

He called out Yasu's name one last time and listened, but there was only the sound of the waves crashing and the rain hitting the water's surface. With a raw throat, pounding headache, and broken soul, Roku swam back toward the bonfire.

He dragged himself ashore, gathered the last of his energy to send up a flare for help, then collapsed into the sand. Chest heaving and crying uncontrollably, he rolled onto his back to face the judgment of the starless sky.

Roku had no idea how much time had passed before someone found him and sat him up. He told them Yasu was still out there and the person dove into the sea to search. Others arrived. He was led to the fire and covered with a blanket. He was shielded from the rain. He was reassured with empty words. Others arrived. So many others.

They formed a long line across the beach. They took out boats. They raked the water with bamboo poles and dragged the shallows with fishing nets, all the while calling out Yasu's name into the storm. At some point, his father raced past into the water. At some point, his mother laid her head against his shoulder and wept. At some point, he was walked home.

Next thing Roku knew, he was on his bed at home instead of his cot at the Academy. Sozin sat across from him on the edge of Yasu's bed. He was drenched and stinking of the sea. Rain pattered against the roof. Thunder

boomed. Sozin's face was in his hands. He stayed that way for a long time, crying. Then he raised his head. His bloodshot eyes fell on Roku and delivered the terrible news.

They could not find Yasu. He'd vanished, stolen by the sea.

At the funeral, there would be no body to burn.




Roku made his way down the steep mountainside as the rain began to fall in torrents. The path became mud and slick rocks, turning his descent into an inelegant combination of jogging, scrambling, sliding, tumbling, and slipping. The rain and mud soaked and soiled his robes and extinguished his flame over and over again.

But each time he fell, he brushed himself off, reignited his fire, and pushed forward. The rest of Oh Wen's group would have set up camp for the night instead of trekking down the dangerous slope in the rain. Soon, maybe around the next bend, Roku would catch sight or scent of a campfire or hear the distant murmuring of their huddled conversations.

See, he told himself, I don't need Gyatso. I don't need anyone.

The already narrow trail narrowed further as it snaked along steep cliffs. A void of darkness loomed over its edge. Soon, the path disappeared altogether, washed out by the storm. Roku wiped his hands against his robes in a futile attempt to dry them, then began to cross with nothing but roots and rocks as handholds.

Roku was almost across when his hands slipped off a rain-slicked rock. His eyes went wide and his hands scrabbled uselessly in the air as he fell back, dropping off the cliffside and down through the darkness.



Roku carried the white marble urn, flanked by his parents and grandparents. Ahead of them, the drummers led the procession to the cemetery, beating a slow, somber rhythm. Behind them followed the royal family, the Fire Sages, and the rest of the nobility. They wound silently through the Capital's streets dressed in mourning white and wearing garlands of sampaguita, proceeding toward the cemetery like a slow parade of midnight spirits.

Yasu's remains were not inside the urn, of course. Instead, the urn held the ashes of twelve years of treasured possessions: the cloth he was

wrapped in after his birth, his first pair of woven koala-sheep wool slippers, a wooden dragon carved by their grandfather, a wooden sword with which he'd "slay" the toy dragon, his favorite brush, his favorite poem, his paintings, his Komodo-rhino leather bracers, and a headpiece that had been a gift from Roku on their last birthday. If these were the objects Yasu would have himself chosen to represent his short life, nobody would ever know.

Roku placed one foot in front of the other. He consoled his mother when her cries grew so anguished, they pierced his heart. He dutifully accepted the commoners' passing condolences. He said what he was supposed to when the Fire Sages paused in their prayers for the people's response. But inside, he was still lying on the beach that night in the rain, shattered.

He lost half his spirit when he lost Yasu. He'd never be whole again.

Eventually, they arrived at the cemetery. Towering walls of white concrete tombs stacked seven or eight high lined either side of the narrow thoroughfare, branching off along the way into smaller, labyrinthine neighborhoods of the dead. Sticks of incense burned to ash, and flowers in varying stages of decay rested on the narrow ledges in front of recently visited grave markers, but most were empty.

Eventually, they reached the section dedicated to their clan and the small open space that awaited Yasu's urn. They came to a sudden stop, and the drums did the same. The mourners spread out on either side of the opening, leaving room for Roku. He stepped forward, held the urn for a moment longer, then set it inside and stepped back. A cemetery worker set to sealing the tomb with an engraved marble plate as the High Sage began the funeral ceremony, which passed in a blur, Roku feeling as if he had left his body and was watching from the clouds.

When Roku came back into himself, nearly everyone had already left. His mother remained, prostrate and sobbing at the base of the wall that held the ashes of her dead son's possessions. His father kneeled beside her, resting a trembling hand on her back.

At one point, Roku's father looked up, eyes rimmed with red and aged a decade in days. He took a deep breath and quietly said, "You should have saved him." Then he helped Roku's mother to her feet and led her away.

Roku waited to cry until they turned the corner.

He'd always suspected strong, confident, happy Yasu—their first born, if only by minutes—had been their favorite child. His father's comments

and his mother's silence had confirmed as much. Roku could not help but feel they would be happier if it were instead his bloated body floating somewhere out in the open water, feeding the sea.

Sozin appeared at Roku's side. The prince stood up straight with his arms crossed, but Roku could tell with a glance at his friend's haggard face that he probably hadn't slept in days.

"It should have been me," Roku said. To be nothing might be a mercy compared to living the rest of his life existing as half of himself.

When Sozin didn't say anything for a long time, Roku grew certain that it was because his friend agreed that the sea should have taken Roku instead of Yasu. After all, it was Yasu he had grown so close to since starting at the Academy, while Roku had been fading into the background.

"It's useless to linger in the past," Sozin said gently after a few more moments—which Roku noticed wasn't a disagreement. "We can't ever change what's happened."

Roku lifted his eyes to the slab of marble that served as his brother's grave marker. Easier said than done.

"We can only look to the future," Sozin continued. "Be who Yasu would have wanted us to be."

Roku sighed. Reached out and traced with his finger the grooves engraved in the stone that marked Yasu's character. "But I don't know who I am without a brother."

Sozin draped an arm over Roku and pulled him close. "I'm not Yasu, but we're brothers too, Roku. Never forget that. We will always be brothers. Always. Until the very end."



Roku woke in the darkness. He was lying on his back atop a mound of rubble, rain falling upon his face. He was sore all over, but nothing felt seriously injured.

He sat up with a groan and used his firebending to summon a small flame in the palm of his hand, surprised at how little energy it seemed to require despite how depleted he felt.

Apparently, he was in a tunnel. Smooth, curved walls of black stone extended in either direction, layered with striations and long, thin ledges.

The ceiling was maybe a dozen feet high with a small, jagged crevice directly overhead.

The last thing Roku remembered was that he had lost his grip while trying to cross a washed-out section of the trail. He had survived the fall—but how? He'd hit the ground hard enough to punch through the earth and land in this tunnel, but not hard enough for that landing to have killed or seriously injured him. Maybe he hadn't been as high up as he'd thought. Or maybe he'd acted out of instinct and used his bending to send a wave of flames at the ground, softening his fall with the blast. Either way, he was alive.

He flung the flame he'd been holding in one direction and watched as it sailed through the tunnel. It went much farther than he expected before burning out in the distant darkness.

Then he jabbed his fist in the opposite direction, sending out another blast of fire that revealed more of the same.

Roku looked left. He looked right. He looked up.

His stomach sank. Despair crept over him. He had no idea where he was or which way to go to find the Earthbenders.

But then he began to laugh to himself as some of Yasu's last words unexpectedly rang in his head.

Didn't you get lost in the Academy's library last week?

TERRIFYING AND TEMPTING

There was a traditional condolence in the Fire Nation offered by the devout whenever someone mentioned the name of the dead: “May their flame light our way.”

Roku hadn’t uttered the sacred words aloud when he and Gyatso had talked about Yasu and Yama, because Roku wasn’t in the habit of doing so. His family—like much of the nobility these days—were not particularly spiritual. But Roku couldn’t stop thinking of the phrase now.

He had walked in a direction that had simply *felt* right after chuckling to himself at the memory of his brother’s final jab at his poor sense of direction. Each time the tunnels—which Roku guessed were ancient lava tubes based on their similarity to others he had seen across his nation’s volcanic archipelago—split or branched off as they snaked their way through the earth, he imagined Yasu next to him, pointing the way. He also noticed that the firebending he had been using to light his way required less and less energy. His flames burned as effortlessly as breathing. And as he walked deeper into the earth, he began to feel a thrumming through his spirit that amplified with each step and turn he took as if some great force was drawing him toward it.

After a few hours of following this ineffable pull, Roku reached the end of the tunnel. It opened up into an unbelievably vast cavern. The air was cool and felt as sacred as any temple’s. Dull gray morning light leaked through a wide fissure high in the stalactite-covered ceiling, revealing a chamber large enough to hold the Royal Palace. The domed walls were layered with lines that marked millennia of ancient lava flows and veined with a black ore that had a red sheen. The ground—which was several feet below the mouth of the tunnel—was comprised of a dark, damp, and densely packed gravel that sloped up to a low mound in the exact center of the cavern.

And upon that central hill, dwarfed by the sheer size of the surrounding space, were three people positioned in a triangular formation, dancing

slowly and silently in perfect coordination.

Roku edged behind a cluster of stalagmites at the mouth of the tunnel and watched. There were two older women and one younger man. They weren't wearing the green robes or armor of the Earth Kingdom, so they must not be the rest of Oh Wen's group. Instead, the women wore tolgu skirts, and the man was in a wanoh loincloth. The fabrics were woven with the traditional red, black, and gold patterns of the Fire Islands, but it had been hundreds—if not thousands—of years since any clan in the Fire Nation had dressed like that outside of historical reenactments or theatrical performances.

But the three had no audience that they were aware of as they continued their synchronized slow dance. So measured were their movements that it took Roku several moments to realize they were not dancing—they were bending. And it took him several more to recognize that even though they were dressed like Firebenders from another era, their glacial movements did not follow the powerful, decisive, and acrobatic style of fire-bending. Instead, they flowed through their forms with the fluid, ever-shifting elegance of waterbending.

These were Waterbenders.

Dressed as long-ago Firebenders.

Which didn't make any sense.

And then Roku remembered the small group of uncontacted natives living on the island that Ta Min had mentioned. Back when Sozin, Yasu, and Roku used to sneak into the Dragonbone Catacombs, they had come across a few scrolls that had described the clans that had lived on the Fire Islands long ago. Some of them were supposedly communities where benders of different elements lived together peacefully. This must be such a clan, their ways unchanged over the centuries. Oh Wen's claim that an Airbender had attacked him only strengthened Roku's speculation.

As Roku continued watching the Waterbenders, he wondered what they were bending. No water moved around them. There was not even a river or pool in the expansive chamber. The only moisture he could think of were the slow drops falling from the ceiling and the fog that hung in the air above ground.

The fog—was that it? Could they be bending the fog? That would explain the dense, unnatural mist that concealed the island throughout the

day until the darkness took over.

Benders could work together to accomplish a task one of them couldn't do alone. Like the Firebenders who had sent that enormous dragon made of flames soaring over the city the night before he left home, or Earthbenders who combined their energy to chuck colossal boulders through the air. Roku had heard of skilled Waterbenders who could conceal themselves by manipulating the moisture in the air to summon a temporary haze over a small area.

But even three powerful Waterbenders working together shouldn't be able to shroud an island of this size—let alone for hours on end, day after day after day, year after year after year. Assuming that's even something that could be done, that kind of energy would require the coordinated efforts of a few hundred benders at least. But the more Roku thought about it, the truer it felt.

After he and Gyatso had first dragged themselves ashore, the Air Nomad had mentioned that he sensed something strange about the spiritual energy of the island. Roku hadn't felt anything unusual at the time, but he had started to when he'd awoken underground after his fall. That feeling grew stronger the deeper he traveled into the tunnels, and even now something tugged at his energy, urging him toward the mound at the center of the cavern.

Roku closed his eyes, focused, and tried to understand the sensation. After several moments, he began to comprehend the shape of things as if he were playing Pai Sho and was starting to see through his opponent's strategy.

In the same way benders could combine their focus to work in concert and multiply the strength of an action, maybe there *was* something about this island—this cavern—that magnified their bending strength even further. Rare sites existed all around the world where the borders between the worlds were thin and spiritual energy flowed more readily. If this was such a place, then that might explain how three Waterbenders could accomplish what should require hundreds.

Roku opened his eyes again. The Waterbenders were still shifting gracefully through their forms as if in a trance.

Sozin was right, but not for the reasons he'd thought.

The Earthbenders hadn't come to this island in search of territory or some rare rock or mineral. They'd come to find this cavern. And the Western Kingdom Trading Company must be a front to shield the government's own intentions to harness its power. The Earth King must have somehow caught wind of Sozin's request to Roku and hired that assassin to try to end Roku before he uncovered exactly this.

Because if three Waterbenders could shroud an entire land-mass in perpetual fog, Earthbenders whose bending had been enhanced by the spiritual energy of this cavern could combine their strength to shake the earth, bury cities, sink islands, reshape entire continents.

Roku shuddered.

This place could not fall into the wrong hands.

The natives had already known this, which must be why they shroud the island in fog and why they attacked Oh Wen's group.

Roku smiled. He thrummed now not only with the spiritual energy of this space but with the smug vindication of certainty. He hadn't needed to bend any other elements to figure everything out. He hadn't needed to enter the Avatar State. He hadn't needed to connect with his past lives or visit the Spirit World. And he hadn't even needed Sister Disha's or Gyatso's help. In fact, the young Air Nomad's prejudiced accusations had prevented Roku from seeing things as clearly as he did now. If he had returned to the Southern Air Temple with that irritating little Airbender, he would not be on the verge of stopping the Earth Kingdom from shaking the world off balance.

If Sozin knew everything Roku had figured out, he'd probably suggest that the most efficient solution would be to let the islanders deal with the Earthbenders. But Roku couldn't do that. They didn't deserve summary executions. Oh Wen and his companions probably didn't even know the full truth, and—as Sister Disha had often reminded Roku—people were not their governments.

So, Roku had to stop them. Find proof that the Earth King was behind all of this. Then make it clear to the world that the new Avatar was no fool.

Overflowing with newfound confidence, Roku decided that he needed to speak to the natives and find out what they knew about the Earthbenders' current location. He'd approach peacefully, but if they proved as hostile to him as they were to Oh Wen and his companions, Roku would tap into the

power he sensed waiting within the cavern to defend himself. They outnumbered him, but he was the Avatar.

Roku took a deep breath, channeled Sozin's confidence, then climbed down out of the tunnel and into the vast chamber.

As soon his foot touched the ground, energy crashed into his spirit like a wave. It roared throughout his body, coursing through his chi pathways, so desperate for release it verged on painful. But unlike a wave, it did not pass and settle. Instead, it reverberated, making the thrumming Roku had felt earlier in the tunnels pale in comparison to this overwhelming sense of power, this sense that he could bend anything completely to his will by merely imagining the destruction he desired. Nobody could stop him. Nothing could stand in his way.

A thought both terrifying and tempting rose to the forefront of Roku's mind: Is this what it was like to enter the Avatar State?

He had never desired power for the sake of power. But with a strength like this, he could be the Avatar the world needed—not after several years of training, but right now.

Roku shook the thought away and looked down at himself. He was neither glowing nor levitating. By all outward appearances, he was unchanged.

He returned his attention to the Waterbenders who were still unaware of Roku's presence in the shadows or the barely restrained energy crackling within him. They must feel the same thing. He had already convinced himself that he was right that they were bending the fog around the island, but experiencing the surge of energy for himself burned away any lingering doubt.

Emboldened, Roku strode to the base of the hill in the center of the immense chamber. He held his hands up, cleared his throat, and spoke. "I am Avatar Roku, and—"

The Waterbenders snapped out of their trance at the sound of Roku's voice, turned with surprised shock, and pulled the moisture from the air to freeze him in place with movements so swift he didn't even finish the sentence.

So much for a peaceful resolution.

Roku flared with a sudden burst of sapphire flames that evaporated the ice and radiated outward like a shockwave, knocking the Waterbenders

down. Roku's breath hitched—he'd never generated fire so hot it burned blue. And he had only meant to free himself, not to harm them.

But his concern was short-lived—the Waterbenders snapped back onto their feet.

Roku put his hands up again as steam rose above him. "I don't want to hurt you."

The feeling was not mutual. From all directions, the three Waterbenders began slinging high-pressured streams of water at Roku. He dodged and spun out of the way, defending himself with arcs of fire from his fists and feet when necessary. It was like he was battling a giant octopus with a hundred flailing tentacles.

The Waterbenders closed in, forcing Roku back toward the tunnels as he continued to avoid the unrelenting attacks. He would turn one water jet or ice spear into steam, only to realize the vapor had been drawn away, recondensed, then whipped back at him from a different angle.

Everything in Roku wanted to go on the offensive, wanted to release the energy building within to neutralize the threat. He could end this in the blink of an eye. But the blue flames he'd produced earlier gave him pause. Letting too much power flow through him might be as impossible to control as a wild dragon.

But they kept attacking.

He tried one more time. "If you don't stop, I—"

One of the Waterbenders reached up, swept their hands outward, and then clapped them together. Fog poured through the wide crevice in the cave's ceiling and condensed into a thousand blades of ice that then darted toward Roku.

There were too many to fend off with punches and kicks, and Roku didn't trust himself to release the kind of massive wall of fire he'd need to block the attack. So instead, he focused his energy and attempted something he'd never done before—raise the temperature of the surrounding air high enough that all those icy spears would harmlessly melt.

The cavern instantly transformed into a furnace, and the shards of ice evaporated. But the sudden spike of intense heat sent Roku to his hands and knees. His head throbbed, his vision blurred, and his insides felt like they were boiling. It was too hot to breathe, and his mouth was so dry, he couldn't even swallow.

Roku lifted his head to call out for the Waterbenders' help—but they lay collapsed on the ground around him, unmoving.

A moment later, the world went black.

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ALL FOR NOTHING

Sozin climbed the sand dune until he reached the library's upper row of windows. They were mostly buried, but there was just enough space to crawl through. He lowered himself onto his stomach and peered inside. A shaft of sunlight spilling over his shoulders revealed the end of a towering shelf crammed with scrolls. Sozin smiled.

He crawled through the opening, hopped onto the stone floor, and stepped clear of the small cascade of sand falling at his back. As he brushed himself off, the sconce at the end of the nearby shelf suddenly whooshed to life with a small flame that glowed an otherworldly green. One by one, other sconces alighted on either side of Sozin, illuminating endless rows of tall, packed shelves. Sozin's smile widened.

"Hello?" he called. "Anyone here?"

Sozin's voice echoed through the vast space, which smelled of ancient ink and parchment, as he listened for a reply. He examined the nearby shelves as he continued to wait for a response and wondered how he was going to find anything since nothing appeared to be labeled. After a few more moments of silence, he started to walk toward the center of the library, hoping he'd find the legendary Wan Shi Tong himself.

Eventually, Sozin reached the end of the shelves and came to an expansive open central space. Intersecting bridges crossed beneath a massive domed ceiling through which a shaft of light spilled. Ornately carved columns and archways decorated with an owl-face motif ringed the area, backlit by the glowing green sconces.

Sozin walked to the center of the bridge stretched out before him and gazed at his surroundings, his mind struggling to take in the scale of the knowledge contained within this place. He must have passed tens of thousands of scrolls to reach this point, and he'd seen only a single row of a single level of a single wing of the library.

Sozin's wonder was interrupted by the sound of someone—no, something—approaching from the shadows across the bridge. Booming

footsteps echoed in the distance. They grew louder and deeper as they neared. Sozin's smile faltered, and his heart began to race. But he stood up straight and waited, suppressing the urge to run and hide.

The owl's wide white face materialized from the shadows first, beady black eyes focused on Sozin. As it entered the light, the rest of the spirit's towering black body took shape. It made its way onto the bridge, causing the ground to tremble with each thundering step, then stopped directly in front of Sozin.

Sozin cleared his throat and bowed. "Wan Shi Tong," he greeted. "He Who Knows Ten Thousand Things."

The spirit met Sozin's gaze with unblinking eyes. "That is I," said Wan Shi Tong. The spirit's even voice was deep and solemn, resonating throughout the library. "But who are you?"

"Prince Sozin of the Fire Nation."

"Hmm," said Wan Shi Tong. "Nobody from the Fire Nation has visited my library since Avatar Szeto, and that was centuries ago. I suppose you have also come to access my knowledge?"

Sozin nodded.

"And if you have made it here and know who I am, then I assume you already know that to do so, you must contribute to my collection."

Sozin reached into his satchel, pulled out a humble-looking tome with a dark red dragon leather cover, and held it out to the owl spirit.

The spirit leaned forward until its face was so close to Sozin that Sozin could see his own reflection in its glossy, void-like eyes. "The new Avatar's childhood journal," Wan Shi Tong said, recognizing the book. "A unique contribution indeed."

Sozin nodded.

"I knew you were close to Avatar Roku, but you must be close indeed to have been entrusted with such an intimate treasure of inevitable historical significance."

Sozin said nothing. Before departing for the island, he had sent Kozaru to swipe the journal from Roku's family home for this specific reason. He still felt guilty, but he reminded himself the betrayal of trust was for the sake of the Fire Nation.

Wan Shi Tong stared at Sozin for a long time without speaking, as if discerning all of this, as if weighing whether the information the journal

contained about the new Avatar's early life was worth its dishonest acquisition. Finally, he blinked again, then swept a black wing over the book, making it vanish. He raised himself back to his full height. "To your credit, at least you did not read it."

Hands now empty, Sozin drew his arms back to his sides and bowed again.

Wan Shi Tong shifted, his talons clicking against the stone floor. "What knowledge do you seek within my library?"

"Knowledge of firebending," Sozin said without hesitation.

Wan Shi Tong considered this. "You have already mastered firebending."

"Yes," Sozin said, "but I also suspect your unrivaled collection contains much about firebending—and all bending arts—that very few know. Perhaps even knowledge lost to my people over the years."

"That is certainly true," Wan Shi Tong said, satisfied with the assumption. "I have scrolls on the Dumog and Eskrima fire-bending styles, which your clans forgot long ago. It would certainly be impressive to see a true revival of such skills."

"As you value knowledge for knowledge's sake, I value firebending for firebending's sake. It is my people's birthright. Our destiny is bound to our understanding of it." Sozin's words had been honest so far, but he began to bend the truth. "Not as a weapon to destroy, but only as an art to master. And can an artist ever become a *true* master if they do not learn how to use every brush, every color, every technique?"

"They cannot," the owl spirit agreed, a note of satisfaction slipping into his resonant words. "Tell my Knowledge Seekers what you need, and they will find it. And my library will always be open to you—if you agree to one more condition."

"Yes?"

"You must share with me all that you have learned of your art. And should you master new techniques or new styles, I demand demonstrations."

"Of course," Sozin said. "Any heights I reach will only be due to riding upon your great wings."

Wan Shi Tong's expressionless eyes blinked. Then he stepped aside. "Proceed, Prince Sozin of the Fire Nation. I will follow your development

—and that of your Nation—with considerable interest.”

“Thank you, Great Spirit.” Sozin bowed once more and proceeded across the bridge. He only let himself smile after the towering owl spirit flew away.



Sozin started at firebending. With the help of the Knowledge Seeker fox spirits, he gathered manuals and guides and treatises and scrolls that grounded in fact many of the legends he’d spent years acquiring. All he had to do was politely request information about a topic, and the agile spirits would locate the relevant text, swiftly climb to the corresponding shelf, and bring it back within a matter of minutes.

Skimming through the gathered volumes, Sozin learned of the training necessary to enhance the heat of his firebending until his flames burned iridescent. He learned that there were methods of channeling his energy into lightning, and methods for defending such strikes that borrowed from water-bending redirection principles. He learned that even the temperature of the air or distant objects could be manipulated with enough energy, enough focus, and that one could indeed learn to emit contained spurts of fire from their feet to rise to impressive heights or achieve a propulsive motion akin to flying. He learned of the existence of the first dragons who could teach one to breathe fire, as well as life-threatening procedures developed during the Yangchen Era through which a Firebender could learn to create targeted explosions of varying magnitudes.

And more.

Of course, reading about a skill was not enough to master it, no more than reading about someone ascending a mountain was the same as making that ascent yourself. It would require years of dedicated training and meditation to master any single one of these abilities, a lifetime to master a handful. Only Fire Avatars like Szeto had developed a mastery over several of the powers or had wielded them at some point or another throughout their lives while in the Avatar State. Sozin was not an Avatar, nor did he have all the time in the world to train. Eventually, he’d become Fire Lord, and he’d have to split his time between any number of competing demands for his attention. Therefore, he would have to be selective about which he decided to pursue and in what order.

As the light that fell through the dome at the center of the library began to dim, Sozin's excitement did not. Driven by the expanding potential of his future, he read greedily and continued requesting texts from the Knowledge Seekers, who were eager to be of assistance. It was not long before Sozin's table was overflowing, and they had to start piling their new finds on the adjacent tables.

After some time, Sozin shifted his attention from specific firebending techniques to conditions in the natural world that impacted firebending. He already knew that Firebenders were at their strongest near the equator or when the sun was at its highest point in the sky and that they were at their weakest near the poles or during a solar eclipse. But he learned that there were times the sun flared, the energy of which could be harnessed if not for the sheer unpredictability of such fiery surges. That, more dependably, they could tap into the energy of close-passing celestial objects like the Great Comet to magnify the strength of their bending—but that the next time the Great Comet passed wouldn't be for another forty-four years.

There were—he would never admit aloud—a few things about which he had been mistaken or misinformed. Slaying a dragon, for instance, did not increase the strength of one's firebending by a thousandfold. In fact, it did not have any impact beyond the loss of a sacred beast's life that angered the other dragons and disturbed their spiritual kin and the Fire Sages. And though a Firebender could learn to heat rock until it transformed to lava, the ability to bend lava belonged to skilled Earthbenders.

Another thing Sozin was wrong about came to light as the central dome began to glow again at dawn. One of the Knowledge Seekers dropped a Szeto Era scroll at his feet that bore the lengthy title "A Correction in Response to the Many Dangerous Falsehoods Perpetuated by the Dishonest 'Traveler' Supposedly Named Ashō." Sozin immediately recognized the name of the author through whom he'd learned about the fog-shrouded island where one could enhance their bending, the island where he'd sent Roku.

Wearing anger's mask, fear crept over Sozin as he read.

Ashō had gotten it all wrong.

And Roku's life was in danger.

For nothing.

Sozin swept the scroll off the table, sending it clattering into the shadows. Then he crossed his arms, leaned back, and considered everything he had not yet read stacked on his table, around his feet, and throughout the library. He hadn't even been here one full day and had barely skimmed the surface.

If he left now, Sozin might be able to make it back to the fog-shrouded island in time to save Roku's life, but he did not know when he'd be able to return. If he stayed, Roku might die, but Sozin was certain he'd discover even more valuable knowledge that he could take back to his father and secure the Fire Nation's future.

Sozin sighed, pushed back his chair, and stood.



Sozin climbed out the library's upper window and hurried toward the sand-sailer. His muscles were stiff from sitting for so long, his head felt groggy from lack of sleep, and his eyes hurt from the sudden morning brightness and the dry heat. But there was no time to waste.

Dalisay and Kozaru were sitting against the shady western side of the half-buried building, sipping tea with the Sandbenders. Their eyes widened in surprise when they caught sight of Sozin, and they scrambled to their feet.

"We're leaving," Sozin said without stopping.

Kozaru ordered the Sandbenders to break down the camp while Dalisay jogged over to Sozin. "Already? It's been less than a day—I would have been in there at least until the equinox."

"Something came up."

"What?"

Sozin grunted.

Dalisay held her silence until they reached the sand-sailer and climbed aboard to wait for the others. "What did you find out about metallurgy?"

"Nothing," Sozin snapped, throwing off his satchel. "I had to prioritize." He turned his attention back to the Sandbenders, tapping his foot impatiently. "Do you think we might be able to get our hands on some eel-hounds out here?"

Dalisay wrinkled her nose and ignored his question. "You could have at least brought me a scroll or two."

“Stealing from the library is forbidden and results in an eternal ban,” he said then called out to Kozaru, “Can they go any slower?”

Kozaru punched a flame at the Sandbenders’ feet, sending up a spray of glass. They began to hurry.

“I assume your priorities were all about firebending,” Dalisay said, continuing the conversation even though Sozin clearly didn’t want to. “But in the future, the world will belong to those who best understand the sciences, not to those with fancy fire-bending tricks good for little beyond winning Agni Kais and impressing girls.”

Sozin turned to Dalisay and scowled until she put her hands up in surrender and then sat down.

Kozaru and the Sandbenders returned a few minutes later. The Sandbenders stowed their equipment, raised the sails, and started bending the vessel back toward Misty Palms Oasis.

As they cut across the dunes, Sozin watched the half-buried library fade into the horizon, hoping he’d made the right decision.

SHARP KNIFE

Malaya shielded her eyes against the brightness as she gazed at the fragments of blue visible through the forest's dense canopy. The dappled sunlight fell through the leaves, already warming the air.

She shouldn't be able to see the sky or the sunlight. She shouldn't be able to see the entire surrounding forest—every unbelievably green vine and leaf and moss-covered tree exposed in all directions as far as she could see. But after a night of heavy rain, the fog had come—then gone.

Malaya was not the only one disturbed by the clear air. Animals scurried about like insects under an overturned stone. Birds darted nervously through the trees, their songs unfamiliar or off-key. Even the leaves seemed to curl or shift as if unsure of what to do in the absence of the moisture's daytime embrace.

The fog lifted during the daytime only twice a year—during each equinox, when the Waterbenders left the Sacred Cave so Ulo could meet Yungib alone. However, the next equinox was still several days away. There had been a few occasions over the course of her life when one of the Waterbenders fell ill, but the mist would only thin since there were still two others to bend the fog.

Something must have happened to them.

And it probably had to do with the Earthbenders.

After Yuming and Qixia had tricked Malaya and bound her hands with stone and her feet to the mountainside, it had taken Malaya hours to chip away enough rock to free herself. By the time she had, night had fallen, heavy rain had begun to fall, and the Earthbenders were long gone. So was Amihan. So was Kilat.

Malaya hoped her gorilla-tarsier was safe, but she didn't have time to look for the creature. She had to reach the Earthbenders before Amihan caught up to them or before they reached the village—if they hadn't already. And once she did, she would try again to persuade them to leave.

Although Yuming's betrayal still stung, Malaya still didn't wish the woman or her companions dead. Trusting her had been a miscalculation, but the trick had been a humane way to slow Malaya, without a trace of the bloodlust Ulo claimed all outsiders possessed. Yuming and Qixia had only wanted to unravel the island's secrets. Curiosity should never be a death sentence.

As Malaya ran along the steep, narrow path that led down the mountain and wound through the dense vegetation, she tried to talk herself into believing the fog's disappearance somehow meant there was still time to intervene.

She was out of the mountains and climbing the hill on the other side of her village's valley when she noticed something even stranger soaring through the blue sky. At first, she mistook the broad-winged figure swooping in wide loops for some oversized hawk on the hunt. But it became obvious on a particularly low pass that it was not a bird but a human. A bald, skinny boy, to be exact. He wore saffron and yellow robes that fluttered in the wind as he clung to a set of wooden and paper wings, scanning the ground below, his brows angled with worry.

She had heard enough of Ulo's stories to recognize the boy was an Air Nomad. And with Ulo's other lies now laid bare, she doubted his claims that they were nothing but nomadic extremists on a never-ending mission to rid the world of those they found impure.

But what was he doing here? She had only known about the Earthbenders—had she missed the arrival of others? And now, without the fog, how many more would follow?

Instinctively, Malaya's hand went to the bow slung over her shoulder. Ulo would want her to shoot him down. To bring a quick end to an obvious threat. Instead, she let the weapon be and simply watched.

The Airbender spotted her a moment later. His face lit up, and he took one hand off his glider to wave, causing himself to wobble before he regained his grip. Caught off guard, Malaya did not return the greeting—she had forgotten that in the clear air, if she could see the boy, the boy could see her.

Despite her stony nonresponse, the boy looped around and began to descend.

Panic set in. Malaya's instinct was to draw back, to conceal herself in the fog. But there was no fog. To make matters worse, the trees were low on this side of the grassy hill, and there were no rocky outcroppings behind which she might easily disappear. She could run, but without Kilat, she didn't stand a chance of escaping his glider. So instead, Malaya stood her ground and drew her dagger. As much as she doubted Ulo's stories, she wasn't going to take any chances.

The Airbender touched down several feet away, landing so clumsily, he almost fell over. The wooden and paper wings disappeared with a flick of his wrist as his flying contraption converted into a simple staff. He let out a sigh of relief, then held up his hands and approached cautiously.

"Cool knife," he said.

"Sharp knife," she said.

The boy stopped short, then cracked a broad smile as he kept his distance. He had a kind face and a sleepy-eyed look. She guessed he was around her age, maybe a bit younger. Amihan was the only other Airbender she'd ever met, but the boy's energy felt considerably gentler.

"I'm Gyatso," he said, undeterred.

Malaya didn't respond—even if she did feel the urge to return his smile.

The Air Nomad named Gyatso went on. "I'm looking for my friend—well, not my friend." He ran a palm over his shaved head. "My . . . colleague? Traveling companion? Yeah, traveling companion. Anyway, his name's Roku. Have you seen him running around? Tall, lean guy in saffron and yellow robes like mine. Black hair like yours. But longer. And glossier. Not that there's anything wrong with your hair—I actually think that short, messy hair looks great on you. Practical. Intimidating." He blushed. Looked down. Cleared his throat. "Anyway—Roku: Shoots fire out of his hands and feet, especially when he's angry, which is, like, a lot of the time. Have you seen him?"

Malaya absentmindedly combed her free hand through her hair. She had no idea what to make of this kid. And apparently there was at least one other outsider on the island that nobody else in the clan was aware of. Instead of answering his question, she readjusted her grip on the dagger and waited for him to reveal more.

"Sorry, that was a lot," Gyatso said. "I tend to ramble when I'm nervous. Let me start over." He cleared his throat again. "I'm Gyatso, an Air

Nomad from the Southern Air Temple. No threat to you. I'm a pacifist. My friend—er, companion—who's almost probably not a pacifist—we came to the island together a few days ago, but we got separated, and I'm trying to find him."

Malaya didn't say anything. A warm breeze stirred the tall grass that carpeted the hillside. A flock of birds flew lazily along the horizon in the distance, a rare sight that nearly tugged Malaya's attention away.

Gyatso stood with his back straight, shoulders relaxed. His eyes radiated a disarming warmth and kindness despite the teardrop-shaped blade she pointed at him. He didn't seem like a threat, but she'd thought the same about Yuming and Qixia.

"Why did you and your friend come here?" she finally asked.

Gyatso hesitated. "It's complicated."

"How did you get separated?"

"Um. That's also complicated."

Malaya was losing her patience. Her mind went to the remaining basilisk-centipede poison in one of the small pouches tied to her belt. "How did you find the island?"

"Oh, that's an easy one," Gyatso said. "A map!" He thought for a moment. "But it was kind of written in this secret code that Roku said he remembered how to read but actually didn't, so it was maybe more so by luck."

Malaya had many other questions she guessed the Airbender wouldn't be able to answer. Still, as much as she needed to catch up to the Earthbenders before it was too late, it would be wildly irresponsible to run off and leave this Airbender to do whatever he wanted on the island.

"I'm Malaya," she said.

"You live here?"

She nodded.

He nodded.

Malaya lowered the dagger a bit, glad that the information didn't seem to change the way he looked at her. When she had admitted as much to Yuming and Qixia, they'd fixed their curiosity on her as if she were another exotic animal they'd discovered and planned to sketch then name.

Gyatso smiled again as he gestured to the ground. "Mind if I sit? Flying took a lot out of me."

“Go ahead.”

Gyatso laid his staff down and sat on the grass cross-legged. He nodded at the space next to him. “Care to join me?”

“No.”

“Fair enough.” He took out a pouch from his satchel, unknotted the string that had cinched it closed, and poured a handful of round, deep purple fruits into his palm. He looked up at Malaya. “Are these safe to eat?”

“Star apples,” she said. “The skin is toxic, but you can cut it in half, scoop out the seeds, and eat the flesh.”

“Good thing I asked first. May I?” He held out his hand. It took Malaya a beat to realize he was asking for her dagger.

She shook her head.

“Later then,” Gyatso said, dropping the star apples back into his pouch. “I wonder if they’d make a good pie filling.”

“Pie?”

“Yeah, pie.” Then Gyatso understood. “Ah, I see—you don’t have pies all the way out here. That’s too bad. You’re missing out. Speaking of being all the way out here, I’ve never seen anyone from the Fire Nation dressed like you before.”

Malaya wondered why everyone seemed to think she was Fire Nation as she glanced down at her sleeveless tunic, belt, and modified tolgè skirt. Maybe it was because of all the red in the cloth. “This island belongs to no nation,” she said, looking back up. “Only to the Lambak clan.”

“Interesting.” Gyatso stroked his chin. “You really can sheath that dagger. I promise I’m not going to harm you.”

Malaya did not put it down. “As if you could.”

He shrugged.

Malaya’s eyes darted to the still-muddy path, unsure of what to do. Every moment she wasted talking to the boy, the Earthbenders were getting farther away.

Gyatso noticed her agitation. “Am I keeping you from something?”

“Yes,” she said.

Gyatso stood, brushed off the grass that clung to his robes, and picked up his staff. “Then let’s get moving.” He gestured for her to lead the way.

She jabbed the dagger in his direction.

“Right—no trust, stabby stabby.” He sidled past her onto the path and began to walk, seemingly unconcerned about the possibility of a blade to the back.

He was annoying, but not *that* annoying. And there was no better option than to keep him in sight while she caught up to the Earthbenders. Malaya sheathed her dagger and followed.

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EMBERS GOING GRAY

Roku woke from a dream about walking through the Floating Garden with Ta Min feeling like the charred remains of a burnt-down building. He was so drained and exhausted that he couldn't even summon enough strength to open his eyes, let alone move a muscle. But he didn't need to do either to realize that wherever he was, it was not the cave. The air was too warm and humid, and the overwhelming energy that had blazed within him in that place was gone.

And Roku couldn't decide if he was more relieved or regretful.

A hand slid under the back of his head and gently tilted it forward. "Drink this, Avatar," said an old man's soothing, deep voice. "It will help you recover your energy more swiftly and more smoothly."

This must be Abbot Rabten, Roku thought as he gathered enough strength to part his lips. A soothing floral tea heated to the perfect temperature slipped past his lips and down his throat, then settled warmly in his stomach. Somehow, he was back at the Southern Air Temple. But how?

He remembered finding the Waterbenders. He remembered trying to defend himself and being unable to control the strength of his firebending. He remembered raising the temperature of the cavern so much that it melted the shards of ice that had been flying at him and made himself pass out. And the Waterbenders—he remembered their bodies on the ground.

Roku forced open heavy eyelids and looked at Abbot Rabten, ready to argue about how he needed to return to the island, check on the Waterbenders, protect the Earthbenders from the natives, and make sure the Earth King didn't steal the island because who knew what he'd do with its mysterious power.

Except it wasn't Abbot Rabten.

The old man kneeling next to Roku and pouring tea into his mouth had a big gray beard and long gray hair tied back in an ancient Fire Islands style. He wore the same type of black, red, and gold handwoven wanoh loincloth as the male Waterbender in the cavern, but additionally, he wore a

bayyaung blanket draped over one shoulder and a belt of cut shells around his waist. Despite his age, he was lean with muscle and his gaze was sharp and assessing.

This wasn't the Southern Air Temple.

Roku looked around. He was in a hut that had a roof of dried nipa palms and walls of bamboo slats upon which hung skulls and weapons. Heat and smoke drifted up through the floor, and he could hear the soft sounds of people and livestock moving about outside. Through the small doorways cut into either side of the hut, he saw sunlight for the first time in days.

"Easy," the old man said as Roku tried—and failed—to sit up. "The tea works quickly, but not that quickly."

Questions burned at the tip of Roku's tongue, but he still couldn't muster enough strength to find his voice. But the old man didn't miss the confusion in Roku's eyes.

"We're in my hut," he explained. "I'm Ulo, Chief Elder of Lambak clan—the last surviving clan on this island, which you somehow found. You also somehow found your way into the Sacred Cave."

So, Roku had been right about the natives.

"As you experienced for yourself," the old man named Ulo continued, "the site overflows with spiritual energy which, without proper training, is nearly impossible for a bender to control. So, I will give you the benefit of the doubt and assume you were not intentionally trying to kill our Waterbenders."

Roku was able to offer the slightest nod.

"They are alive," Ulo said, anticipating the next question Roku couldn't voice, "but injured. They were able to bend enough moisture around themselves to cool their bodies so you didn't bake them alive. Of course, when the last droplets of water evaporated, so did their protection. Thankfully, we knew something was wrong because the fog had lifted, and we arrived in time to get them—and you—to our healer before it was too late."

Roku tried to process everything. He had never taken a single life before, and apparently he'd almost taken three because he'd been unable to control his firebending. But what the old man told him confirmed both that the Waterbenders were part of the island's native clan and that the cavern allowed the benders to access formidable power. But if they were as intent

on keeping the place hidden from the outside world as he'd expected, why was he still alive?

"There's much more for us to discuss," Ulo said, "and we are honored to host the Avatar." Roku wondered how the chief knew that he was the Avatar. "But first you need to rest."

Ulo tilted the rest of the tea between Roku's lips, then got up and left, disappearing down a ladder.

Roku tried to move to follow, but a grogginess settled into his brain, and he felt as heavy as Amra. His eyelids closed, and his consciousness dimmed like embers going gray.

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INFESTED WITH SUCH DECAY

The Air Nomad would not shut up as he and Malaya followed the path along the sun-drenched hills. He spoke as things came to mind, weaving rambling narratives interjected with his own thoughts, opinions, or feelings on the events or the people he described. And he spoke expecting nothing in return, not even her attention.

Malaya, for her part, kept her mouth closed. He didn't need any questions to maintain his momentum, and she was determined not to divulge anything in case this was all some act to put her at ease. Nonetheless, she found his openness refreshing but disorienting. It was the exact opposite of listening to Ulo, whose stories were serpents slithering through the under-growth: beautiful, slick, and insidious.

Gyatso told her about the new Fire Avatar named Roku who wasn't a bad guy—but might never be a good one if he never learned to stop overcompensating for his obvious lack of self-confidence by making rash decisions and trying to make himself look like this big, bad Firebender. He told her about Roku receiving a request from Prince Sozin to travel to this island and persuade the Earthbenders to leave, and about how they'd snuck out on Gyatso's sky bison and—eventually—managed to find the island.

As they climbed the last hill before the valley, Gyatso told her how they'd followed the Earthbenders' trail, caught up with one of their guards named Oh Wen, and—after a brief fight during which Gyatso had saved the Avatar from being crushed to death—learned that the group worked for a company that was searching the island for some rare type of rock. He told her about arguing with Roku because Prince Sozin's request was obviously a ruse that Roku refused to see because the prince was his closest friend.

Gyatso told her about how they had gone their separate ways, but that his guilt at abandoning Roku had grown over the course of that rainy night. After a long conversation with Oh Wen the next morning, he had decided to go after Roku while Oh Wen returned to his ship. Gyatso hadn't made it far,

however, before he reached a point where the trail had been completely washed out from the mountainside by the previous night's storm.

"What did you do?" Malaya asked, her curiosity finally getting the best of her.

"I jumped off the cliff." Gyatso held up his staff and flicked its wings open then closed. "Except instead of finding Roku, I found you."

"Why did you come with Avatar Roku in the first place?" she asked.

Gyatso stopped walking and turned to Malaya. He hesitated, as if he wasn't going to answer, then did. "Something's been wrong with my airbending for a while now. But I've figured out that it works whenever I need to help Roku."

"Why do you think that is?"

He rubbed his head. "Have you ever heard of the Air Nomad philosophy of harmonies?"

Malaya shook her head.

He held out his hand. "Can I see your bow?"

Malaya hesitated, then unshouldered the weapon and passed it to Gyatso, nudging her quiver of arrows behind her back in case this was a trick.

Gyatso leaned his staff against a tree, held the bow in front of his face with one hand, then plucked the taut string with the other. The bowstring twanged as it vibrated. Gyatso explained, "Basically, it's the belief that everything is constantly vibrating. This bowstring. The leaves on the trees. The trees themselves. The ground. The roots. The rocks. The entire hillside. Even the island."

Malaya looked around. "That's ridiculous."

"Right. We can't see or sense most vibrations—they're too small."

Malaya focused on a stalk of grass nearby. It looked completely still, but the longer she watched it, the more she started to notice its minute quavering. Maybe there was something to it. "What about us?"

"Even us," Gyatso said seriously.

Malaya held out her hands, trying—and failing—to hold them perfectly still.

"According to the philosophers, each person's natural vibrations create a rhythm as unique as their fingerprints." The bowstring finally came to a rest, so Gyatso plucked it again. "And just as two or more complimentary

notes in music can create harmonies, the philosophers believed our vibrations sometimes ‘harmonize’ with others.” He handed the bow back to her. “This is why we might feel drawn to certain people more than others, even before we really get to know them.”

Malaya thought she caught something in the Air Nomad’s eyes, but he cleared his throat and turned away before she could tell for certain. When he faced her again, he held two leaves together by their stems. He blew on them until they fluttered rapidly against each other, eliciting a quiet, high-pitched whistle.

“So that’s you and Roku?” she asked.

“Possibly? It could explain my airbending. Like, maybe, when I’m around him, my spirit remembers its rhythm, remembers who I’m supposed to be. We each lost someone very close to us, so maybe that has something to do with it.” He held out the leaves on his open palm and let the wind carry them away. “But if we find him, never tell him I said that.”

“Hmm.”

Gyatso cracked a smile. “You don’t seem convinced.”

“I need to think about it some more,” she said, impressed at the wisdom he held despite his youth. “I’ve never really felt that way around anyone. But I understand the basic idea. It’s like riding a gorilla-tarsier.”

“A gorilla what?”

“A gorilla-tarsier.”

Gyatso’s face remained blank.

Malaya remembered from eavesdropping on Yuming and Qixia that the tree-leaping animals didn’t exist anywhere else in the world, so she described them to Gyatso as best as she could, still hoping Kilat was somewhere safe. He listened, astonished. When she finished, he asked with childlike wonder, “Can I please ride one?”

Malaya laughed. “That brings me to my point—a gorilla-tarsier only lets certain people ride them. Nobody knows why. But maybe your Air Nomad philosophers are onto something.”

“So, you’re saying I *can* ride one, but I need to find the *right* one?”

“Exactly. They’re vegetarians and generally docile creatures, but if you try to climb atop the wrong one, that would probably be the last thing you ever did.”

“Fair enough.” Gyatso scanned the surrounding trees.

“Are you looking for one right now?”

“Maybe.”

She laughed and took the lead. They kept walking and soon crested the eastern side of the valley as the sun shone high overhead, the soil still smelling of the rain. Malaya bit her lower lip as she paused to take in the rare sight. The terraced hillsides stretched out under the blue sky. Rice stalks undulated like waves in a sea of pale green and yellow. The cluster of huts that comprised her clan’s village waited below like seeds in a cupped palm.

“We need to backtrack a bit and find a place to lay low until the fog returns or night falls,” she said.

“And then?”

“And then you’ll wait for me,” she told the Air Nomad.

He leaned against his staff. “Still don’t trust me?”

“No,” Malaya said. “But that’s not the issue. Our chief isn’t going to be happy to see me because of some choices I made, so I need to find out what’s happened to the Earthbenders and your friend without being seen. It would be a lot harder to do that with you on my tail, chattering incessantly about vibrations and harmonies and your new best friend Roku.”

“He’s not my best friend,” Gyatso corrected.

“Not yet,” Malaya said with a smirk.

“Enough about me. What kind of choices did you make?”

Malaya turned around. “The kind you can’t take back.”



Malaya returned only a few hours after sunset. She found Gyatso exactly where she’d told him to wait behind a rocky outcropping far off the path. The Air Nomad sat cross-legged, meditating deeply enough that he hadn’t noticed her approach. Without the goofy grin she’d already seen grace his features so often, he looked older, somber. As if his meditation was not bringing the peace he’d expected.

Despite the fact she believed his rambling, unfiltered stories were true, she hadn’t been able to shake the fear that she’d misplaced her trust yet again and would come back to find him gone. But here he was. He’d even listened about not starting a fire in case someone at the village noticed the smoke.

She poked Gyatso in the shoulder with her bow. Startled, his eyes shot open, and he spun away onto his feet, picking up his staff as he did so. “Oh—it’s you.” He relaxed. “You scared me.”

“That doesn’t seem difficult.”

“Was that a joke?”

Malaya shrugged, tossed him a pouch of dried mushrooms she’d swiped from the village stores, then sat down on a fallen log.

Gyatso sniffed the pouch and made a face.

“They taste better than they smell,” she said.

He popped one into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. “That’s debatable.” He passed the pouch back. “Any sign of the Earthbenders or Roku?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.”

“Really?”

“Really. I don’t even know where my gorilla-tarsier has gone.”

Malaya felt as puzzled as Gyatso looked. After Yuming and Qixia had left her bound to the mountainside, their group must have continued along the path. The trail would have taken the Earthbenders through the foothills, into the valley, and to the village. Yet there was no sight of the Earthbenders in the village, no trampled vegetation to hint they’d strayed from the path, and no signs of struggle along the way to suggest that Amihan had caught up and ambushed them.

She also hadn’t seen Ulo, but that wasn’t unusual. He often remained inside his hut for long periods of time or ventured to the Sacred Cave to pray or meditate, especially as the equinox approached.

The rest of the clan had seemed unsettled while they went about their typical evening tasks of cooking and cleaning and washing up, anxious without the fog throughout the day and worried about what tomorrow might bring. But from what she’d overheard, they accepted—or, at least, didn’t openly question—Ulo’s uncharacteristic explanation. Which was that he had simply instructed the Waterbenders to stop bending the fog a few days sooner before the equinox festival so they could relax in the hot springs and everyone could enjoy the extra sunlight.

Earlier than usual, the villagers had doused their cooking fires and disappeared into their huts for the night. The buzzing drone of insects took over as stillness settled over the valley.

“What are you thinking?” Gyatso asked after Malaya had been quiet for a long time.

“They vanished into thin air,” Malaya said. “Like the fog.”

“You suppose they’re safe?”

She shrugged.

“What’s the deal with that fog, anyway?” Gyatso asked, an obvious attempt to nudge the conversation in a less dire direction. “It isn’t natural, is it?”

She shook her head. “Waterbenders.”

“Hmm,” Gyatso said, taking in the first piece of information about her community that she’d revealed to him. “Your Waterbenders must be more powerful than any I’ve ever heard of before.”

“They can’t normally do that kind of thing?” Malaya asked. According to Ulo, the Water Tribe often waged wars by summoning destructive tidal waves, relentless blizzards, sub-zero cold snaps, or fatal ice storms.

“That much fog for that long over an island of this size—definitely not. Maybe hundreds of them working together. But your village didn’t look that big.”

“We only have a handful,” Malaya said, unsurprised to uncover yet another one of Ulo’s lies. It was like coming upon a tree that looked perfectly fine on the outside only to discover it was rotted and lifeless within. And then realizing the entire forest was infested with such decay.

“And you have people here who can bend the other elements?” he asked.

Malaya nodded. “But most of the clan are non-benders, like me.”

“To be honest, if your Waterbenders are that powerful, I fear what your other benders are capable of.”

“We’re not murderous savages,” she said without complete confidence.

“Not even your Airbender?” Gyatso asked, referring to the attack on Oh Wen. “That’s not something any Air Nomad would do . . . but I suppose it’s possible if she were raised by people who didn’t know our ways.”

“She’s supposed to keep the island safe,” she said. “Like me.”

“Do I have to worry about my ears?”

“Only how big they are.”

Gyatso laughed.

Malaya managed to keep a straight face. “Amihan — our Airbender — and I are the clan’s scouts.” Malaya explained their responsibilities. “I didn’t know until recently that part of the duties included killing outsiders.”

“Ah,” Gyatso said, “you refused. And that’s why your chief won’t be happy to see you.”

Malaya nodded, then described incapacitating Amihan and trying to warn the Earthbenders, only to end up with her hands and feet bound with stone.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Gyatso said regarding Yuming and Qixia’s refusal to leave. “After all, they work for the Western Kingdom Trading Company.” He said the last part with an uncharacteristic resentfulness. Then he took a deep breath as if to calm himself. “You made the right decision, though. They don’t deserve to die.”

“I know. I said I couldn’t take the decision back — not that I wanted to.”

Gyatso nodded. “So, our goals are aligned.”

“It seems so,” she said.

“What now?”

Malaya thought for a moment. “Do you hunt?”

“Definitely not,” he said with obvious distaste.

She went on anyway. “Hunting isn’t about how accurately you can shoot an arrow or throw a spear. It’s not about how strong or fast you are, or how sharp your blade is. Don’t get me wrong — those things matter. But even more important is patience. Most of a hunt is waiting, watching for the right moment.”

“So, we wait?” the Air Nomad asked.

“And we watch.”

“But what if something’s happened to Roku or the Earth-benders?” Gyatso asked.

“Then we’d already know it.”

THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE

The next time Roku opened his eyes, the hut's floor was striped with golden light that leaked through the spaces between the wall's bamboo slats. The old man with the long, gray hair—Ulo, Roku thought he remembered—was seated on a mat nearby, leaning back against the adjacent wall with his eyes closed and arms crossed as if in meditation. Outside, he heard the crowing of pig-roosters, the sloshing of water, the crackling of cooking fires. The sounds of a village waking up.

Roku's entire body ached, and he still didn't have enough energy to bend even the smallest of flames. However, he gathered enough strength to scoot into a half-sitting, half-leaning position against the wall.

At the sound of Roku shifting, Ulo's eyes opened. His face broke into a gentle smile, and he uncrossed his muscular arms. "Ah, you're awake."

Roku tried to speak but his throat was too dry, too sore, and he erupted in a fit of coughing. With a flick of his wrist, Ulo filled a cup of water with his waterbending, then offered it to Roku.

Roku drank until the cup was empty and then set it down. He cleared his throat, which no longer felt as if he had swallowed a handful of thorns. "How do you know I'm the Avatar?" he asked, vaguely remembering what the old man had said before.

"Your aura," Ulo said as if it were the most obvious fact in the world. "It burns like the sun."

"You can see my aura?"

"I can."

Roku was skeptical. In the Fire Nation, it was said only the Fire Sages from ancient times were close enough to the spirits to perceive the specific shape of a person's energies. Long ago, that's how they'd identify the Avatar. But as time went on and the divide between humans and spirits widened, the Fire Sages had to develop less direct methods. The only people who were purported to possess such a skill these days were charlatans attempting to separate the naïve from their silver.

“I can tell you don’t believe me,” Ulo said, “but that’s okay. Nonetheless, it’s an honor to meet you, Avatar . . .”

“Roku.”

“Yes. Avatar Roku. I’ve lived a long time but never had the chance to meet any of your prior incarnations.”

“You’re the chief,” Roku recalled. “Of the Lambak clan—is that right?”

“That’s right.”

“I’m not familiar with it.”

“By design.”

“You’re a mixed community, aren’t you?” Roku asked, remembering the conclusion he’d reached as he watched the Waterbenders in the cave. “One of those that cut themselves off from the rest of the world to resist joining one of the Four Nations.”

Ulo nodded. “However, I would not say we resisted ‘joining’ as much as we resisted colonization, subjugation, and forcible segregation then annexation. Non-benders and benders of all elements have lived here together peacefully for hundreds of years. And we intend to keep it that way.”

Despite his fatigue, Roku did not miss the sharpness of that last sentiment. “That explains the fog.”

Ulo nodded, then gestured toward the shaft of light falling through the window. “Unfortunately, it will be days until our Waterbenders have regained enough strength to conceal the island again. There are others of course, but they’re still young and require much more training before they can safely and skillfully waterbend like that. We can only hope that nobody else decides to visit our shores in the meantime.”

Roku’s body remembered the overwhelming energy that had flowed through him the moment he’d stepped through the tunnel and into the domed space with the Waterbenders. Not a trace of that energy remained within him, and part of him longed to go back and feel his spirit ignite again. But a larger part of him feared it at a primal level, afraid of what he’d done and what that force could do in the wrong hands.

Nobody should be that powerful.

To ensure that nobody was, he needed to understand fully the power of the cavern—the Sacred Cave, as Ulo had called it before. His Fire Nation–forged instincts compelled him to ask about it directly, but Roku thought of

how Sister Disha would counsel patience. He needed to keep the questions to himself for the moment and follow the path of least resistance. Given the clan's isolationist history, asking about the Sacred Cave too directly and too quickly might give Ulo the impression that Roku had come to the island intending to exploit its power. If he hoped to enlist the chief's help in finding the Earthbenders and letting them leave—alive—Roku needed the chief to see that the Avatar truly had come to maintain balance.

“Speaking of visitors,” Ulo went on, as if reading his mind, “what brings you to our humble island?”

Roku sat up fully. Attempting to summon Avatar-level gravitas, he laid out the events from the moment he received Prince Sozin's request for help to the moment he fell into the tunnels and encountered the Waterbenders. He spoke as clearly and plainly as possible, hiding nothing—except Gyatso's unfounded accusations against Sozin.

Ulo listened with a steely expression, stroking his white beard and giving nothing away.

“It's understandable that your people attacked out of self-defense,” Roku said as he concluded. “But the Earthbenders are not here to harm any of you.”

Ulo crossed his arms and went quiet for a long time. When he spoke, it was with a quiet authority. “In one breath, you say they have come here to steal our resources. In the next, you say they will not harm us. But of all people, certainly the Avatar must understand that to harm a land is to harm its people.”

“I'm here to ensure they don't do either,” Roku said, stifling a yawn. He wished he could sound more resolute, but all the effort it took to tell Ulo about everything had sapped what little energy he had regained. “Tell your clan to stand down. Help me find the Earthbenders. I'll convince them to leave and never return.”

“A logical idea, but it appears you need more rest.” Ulo rose. “We'll discuss this further when you're feeling better. I can even show you around the village and introduce you to everyone.”

“But the Earthbenders—”

“Are no immediate threat,” Ulo said, then left.

Tiredness suddenly overcame Roku. Following the path of least resistance, he closed his eyes and let himself fall back to sleep, hoping he'd

dream of Ta Min again.

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LOCAL ELEMENTS

Two more days passed before Roku finally felt well enough to leave the chief's hut. With some help from Ulo, he ducked through the front entrance and descended the bamboo ladder to finally see the village for the first time.

His legs were stiff from lack of use, and he felt off-balance as he began to walk. The air was warm and muggy, the sky overcast. It was late afternoon and harvest time, so there were few people lingering around the collection of stilted huts nestled into the valley. Villagers dotted the terraced rice paddies that followed the contours of the surrounding mountains. They worked their way slowly through the waist-high stalks, chopping the crop at the base with bolo machetes and then bundling clumps together, leaving behind rows of cut stems in shallow, muddy water.

Roku's family owned many rice fields throughout the archipelago. When he and Yasu were young, their father would sometimes take them to survey the workers. "It's good to let them see you," their father would always say, "so they don't get lazy." Yasu and Roku had always looked on with pride, but like many other things, those trips ended after Yasu's death.

So, it was a familiar enough scene that as Roku took it in, he felt as if he were in the Fire Nation despite Ulo's claim otherwise. Only a few things felt different. The islanders wore the garb of the ancient Fire Islands but no hats—probably because they were unaccustomed to working under direct sunlight. Then there was the unusually dark metal of the machetes they swung, which seemed to have a red sheen at certain angles. Finally, thanks to Gyatso's parting words, Roku couldn't help but imagine the strain of the work.

"Beyond farming rice, we gather fruit, vegetables, nuts, fungi, snails, and a variety of medicinal plants from the wild," Ulo said as they wandered slowly, Roku using the old man's arm for support. "As you can see, we keep small livestock like pig-chickens in the village, large livestock outside. But we also hunt, fish, and trap. We use clay, hollowed gourds, or coconut shells for our containers, and we weave our clothing and baskets and huts

from the fibers of our plants. Whatever we require, the island provides—so long as we protect it and never take more than we need.”

Ulo beamed at the self-sufficiency of it all as he took Roku around to each place where such tasks occurred and answered the Avatar’s questions about their daily activities and customs. When they came to the last hut, the village’s forge, a Firebender with wild hair and a long, braided beard was hammering away at narrow piece of glowing metal. “I’ve never seen steel like that before,” Roku said. “What kind of alloy do you use?”

“Local elements,” Ulo said.

He started to turn them around, but Roku eyed the footpath that continued beyond the village. “Is that the way to the Sacred Cave?”

Ulo nodded.

“Can I see it?”

“Not today,” Ulo said. “You still need to rest, and I must tend to some pressing clan matters after I walk you back.”

“Did your scout locate the Earthbenders?”

Ulo’s mouth lifted in a smile that failed to reach his eyes. “Something much less interesting, I’m afraid—there are signs of a possible bark beetle infestation in the grove on the other side of the valley that I must examine.”

Roku’s gaze lingered on Ulo’s face for a moment, then shifted back to the path. “Does everyone who steps foot in the Sacred Cave leave feeling as drained as I did?”

“Not those with proper training,” Ulo explained. “From the time our benders are small children, we begin to prepare them to enter the Sacred Cave with a variety of breathing and meditation exercises developed by our people over the centuries. When they’ve mastered those techniques, they are allowed to enter—but only for a short time. We gradually increase that length of time to increase their tolerance. Eventually, they’re able to remain in the cavern safely long enough to begin learning to harness its power for bending.” Ulo chuckled. “As you know, sending a bender in without that training is like dropping someone who does not know how to swim into the middle of the sea.”

Which was the perfect way Roku would have described being identified as the Avatar.

Roku selected his next question carefully. “Can your benders channel that sacred energy even when they return above ground?”

Ulo shook his head. “The power is not ours to claim. Just as the first of our kind relinquished their bending to the lion-turtles after returning from the Spirit Wilds, so must we leave ours in the cave. We make offerings each equinox so that Yungib continues to allow us to borrow it. Any misuse would invite the cave spirit’s wrath.”

“I see,” Roku said, hoping Ulo was telling the truth. “The cave spirit’s name is Yungib?”

Ulo nodded, then gestured back toward the village. “Shall we?”

Sensing Ulo had divulged as much as he was going to for the moment, Roku nodded and let the chief lead him back.

Even so, it was the most Roku had yet learned about the cave. Their conversations during Roku’s intermittent bouts of consciousness had mostly concerned the daily workings of the village, Roku’s training, and news from the outside world. Whenever Roku had asked if Ulo’s people had located the Earthbenders yet, Ulo assured Roku that he’d be the first to know when they did. And whenever the conversation had moved in the direction of the Sacred Cave, Ulo skillfully steered him away, just as he was literally doing on this walk.

Overall, Ulo struck Roku as a strong, sensible, and knowledgeable leader. He cared for his community, understood his people, and knew how to take care of them. And more than that, he was able to run a functioning mixed community of non-benders and benders of each element—something that nobody in the world outside this island had ever managed to do for very long, as far as Roku knew. What the old man was doing here worked. The Fire Nation could use more level-headed, competent leaders like him.

Yet, Roku didn’t completely trust the clan’s chief. Maybe it was the way Ulo guided their conversations so carefully. Or maybe it was the scorn that lurked beneath his words whenever he spoke of the outside world. Or maybe it was the way his calm demeanor seemed a bit too forced.

Ulo was hiding something, and Roku would have to find out what on his own.



When the night deepened and silence settled over the village, Ulo still had not returned from his “pressing clan matters.” Roku stopped pacing, shook out his hands, and peeked out through the entrance of Ulo’s hut into the dense shadows. Nothing moved.

The chief rarely left his side, so it was now or never.

Roku retied his hair and climbed quietly down the bamboo ladder. He snuck through the village, past the last set of huts, and onto the path that led farther from the valley.

It felt good to be outside and moving again and even better to be out from under the old man's hovering presence. Once the village was fully out of sight, Roku paused, rubbed his hands together, and focused his energy enough to produce a small, sputtering flame in the palm of his hand. It was a far cry from what he could usually create, but Roku was relieved to firebend for the first time since the cave. It also cast enough light so that he wouldn't trip over every rock and root in his way.

The path wound across the valley, into dense forest, and then through a grove, where it narrowed to such an extent that Roku's shoulders brushed against the towering dark red stalks of bamboo on either side. The path widened after the grove as the dense forest resumed. Not much farther along, Roku arrived at what looked like a wide, deep pit in which there was an arched rocky passageway set into the hillside.

This had to be it. The entrance to the tunnels. And deeper within, the Sacred Cave.

Roku found a set of stone steps shaped from the surrounding earth, followed them down into the pit, and stepped inside. The flame in his hand blazed with renewed strength, and his spirit buzzed with the familiar energy flowing invisibly through the tunnels. If he had any doubt that he'd be able to tap into the same inexplicable pull that had directed him through the tunnels before, it was erased by these sensations.

But Roku had not gone far beyond the entrance when black markings along the curved walls caught his attention. He moved closer and held his light up to examine them.

They were covered in intricate charcoal drawings that continued along both sides of the walls as far as he could see. It reminded him of the Royal Gallery in the Fire Nation Royal Palace, which contained the portraits of the past Fire Lords as well as paintings of the most important events in Fire Nation history. He had heard the portraits of all the Fire Avatars also used to hang in the Gallery—but then they had been destroyed by the False Avatar and were never replaced.

Roku walked slowly along the walls, understanding that the images also revealed a history. The drawings were crude by Fire Nation standards, but Roku did his best to decipher their meaning.

From what he could tell, the first scenes showed how Fire-benders found and settled an island—this island, probably—then benders of other elements and non-benders started to arrive. But then for whatever reason, it seems that the people split into five different clans that lived on different parts of the island.

Then Roku found himself in front of a chaotic drawing that depicted a burning coastal village, its people and structures aflame. Next to it was an image that showed a flooded riverside village, its people drowning. Then, a village buried in rubble. Then, a village swept away by strong winds.

Roku pondered over these four scenes, trying to put the story together. The best he could guess, they told of how each of the Four Nations had invaded the island and destroyed the different clans at various points. But he wasn't certain. He could definitely believe the Earth Kingdom could have done such a thing. Maybe even the Fire Nation if there had been a good enough reason. But the Water Tribes and Air Nomads? Not so much.

Still, Roku lingered on the scale of destruction that surrounded him on the tunnel walls, the gradual destruction of a people. In the world that had raised him, the Four Nations were a given. Yes, at some point in the past, the different lands and peoples were unified and there had been conflicts and power struggles along the way. But he had always been taught a history that made the eventual boundaries seem as inevitable as wood fueling a fire. Despite all his schooling, nobody had asked Roku to consider too deeply the consequences of those conflicts and the perspectives of those who saw another way the world could be.

Except Sister Disha, Roku now realized.

And Gyatso.

What had the Air Nomad said?

You—your family, your clan, your nation—are the oppressor. What can you offer as Avatar when you can't even understand that?

Roku wandered over to the next drawing, which depicted a picturesque village nestled in a valley with terraced hillsides. It had to be the Lambak clan's village. The only one of the original five clans to have survived?

The next section contained a series of connected, highly detailed scenes.

The first two spoke for themselves. There was an invading army of Earthbenders attacking the Lambak clan. Weaponizing the earth, they severed limbs and crushed skulls. They buried women and children and impaled men. Though the drawing was silent charcoal on stone, Roku felt as if he could hear the anguished cries of the islanders. Then, there was a small band of survivors fleeing the village and seeking refuge underground.

But the following sequence puzzled Roku. The clan huddled atop a hill under a dome, the sun shining directly overhead. The clan still huddled under the same dome, except now with a towering shadow looming over them. Then, the clan massacring the invading Earthbenders using all the elements. Somehow, they'd managed to flip the Pai Sho board on their invaders—but how?

“The Awakening of Yungib,” came Ulo’s voice from behind Roku, startling the Avatar. “The singular most important event in the history of our island.”

Roku gathered himself, trying to pretend like his heart had not leapt into his throat at the chief’s sudden appearance. He turned and greeted Ulo, who was half-lit by the flame Roku held in his palm. Then Roku explained, “I couldn’t sleep.”

“Naturally.” If Ulo was angry, he hid it well. He simply stepped next to Roku until he was so close that Roku could smell the old man’s oniony scent. Ulo gazed at the set of images for a long time without speaking, then leaned forward and brushed a stray mark off the stone. “Something called to our people in that moment,” he said, slipping into the story as if he’d been telling it to Roku the whole time. “They followed that call into the tunnels until they reached a vast cavern, which long ago had been a lake of lava.”

It sounded similar to the way Roku had found the Sacred Cave.

“Our people gathered to await their attackers, outnumbered and overpowered. All they could do was call out in desperation for the spirits to save them from certain destruction.” As he spoke, Ulo began to trace a finger along the sequence of scenes that had confused Roku. “That day happened to be the autumnal equinox, and as the sun reached its highest point in the sky, the spirit arrived. It filled the space with its energy. The benders among the people felt it flowing through them and channeled it to wipe out the invaders.”

If Roku hadn't experienced such a power for himself, he might not believe this part of the story. But he had, so he did.

Ulo smiled. "The clan praised the cave spirit who had granted them the strength to overcome those who sought to subjugate and slaughter them. They begged the spirit to let a fraction of its energy remain in that space, so that they might dedicate themselves to the sole purpose of defending the island and protecting the now-sacred cavern that the spirit inhabited. Sensing their intentions were true and their hearts pure, the cave spirit agreed. The only thing the people had to do was prove their dedication by performing a ritual every equinox."

Roku had been listening respectfully throughout Ulo's telling of the tale's conclusion. The old man was an enthralling storyteller, but Roku wondered how much of it was true. There was an undeniable spiritual energy in the cavern, but from what he'd read, the spirits didn't work like that. They didn't answer human requests, and they didn't strike deals to parcel out their power in exchange for praise. They were incomprehensible, their motivations and reasonings unfathomable. They regarded humans as humans regarded ants: only concerned when the collective—and often unintentional—actions of the ants impacted some corner of their own world.

And thanks to growing up with his nation's prince, Roku was fully aware of the fact that the historical paintings in the Royal Gallery were meant to shape a favorable image of the royal family. Maybe something like that was at work here? Perhaps it was not the Four Nations that had destroyed the other clans but the Lambak themselves, who were then free to craft stories of their heroic survival. Or, perhaps there had only ever been a single clan, and this narrative was created to stoke the people's fear of outsiders.

"Over time, we learned to truly harness and extend that power," Ulo said. "Our Waterbenders cast fog each day to keep us concealed from passing ships. The Earthbenders shift the coastlines each season to make our shores unchartable to those curious enough to approach. Our Firebenders forge weapons to defend against those dangerous enough to venture inland."

Roku's eyes lingered on the grotesque slaughter depicted on the wall. "And your Airbenders?"

“Are as flexible as the Air Nomads in the ways they serve our clan.” Here, he turned to Roku. “But we have never used this power for any other purpose than to keep the island—and Yungib, the cave spirit—safe.”

The old man may have been molding his people’s history like sculptor’s clay, but the results were undeniable: non-benders and benders of each element, using their skills to complement each other, to defend and serve a greater purpose—it seemed like something out of some utopian fantasy tale. Yet here was such a community that had survived centuries thanks to a remarkable collaboration of skill sets. The world could learn from this. He could learn from this.

Perhaps the Avatar’s duty to maintain balance should mean more than struggling to preserve an uneasy peace between four political bodies or punishing those who committed injustices or defending humans against dark spirits. He didn’t yet see the shape of what that might mean, but maybe he was beginning to.

Roku was also starting to wonder if he might have to do more than just persuade the Earthbenders to leave the island alone—he might have to advocate for the clan’s continued independence from the Fire Nation. Fire Lord Taiso would not easily agree to let the Lambak remain outside the Fire Nation’s influence given his fixation on crushing the Outer Island Rebellions, but Roku would have to find a way to convince him to do just that. If he was going to maintain balance between the Four Nations, none of them could have access to the power within the Sacred Cave. He wasn’t even certain the native clan itself should.

“We continue to commemorate the Awakening of Yungib every equinox,” Ulo said, placing a hand on the center of Roku’s back as he guided the Avatar toward the exit. “We feast, we tell stories, we dance, we sacrifice, we give thanks. And it is on each equinox, when the sun reaches its zenith, that Yungib renews his blessing. Tradition dictates that only the clan’s chief is allowed to enter the Sacred Cave to perform the ritual, but I believe the cave spirit brought you to us for a reason. So, come with me this equinox, Avatar Roku—the day after tomorrow. Meet Yungib, and let’s find out together what that reason might be.”

It was an intriguing proposition. After all, he already knew plenty of humans, but if he was to serve as the bridge between the human realm and Spirit World, he needed to become acquainted with some spirits.

Still, he could not shake the feeling that some danger or ulterior motive lurked behind Ulo's request.

There was only one way to find out.

"It would be an honor," Avatar Roku said.

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MARAUDING BANDS OF AIRBENDERS

The next morning, Malaya returned to find Gyatso sitting in the hot springs by torchlight, a few wild hog-monkeys lounging on either side of him. They'd all been blowing bubbles under the water as the steam rose from the surface of the pools, fogging the sulphur-scented air. But at the sight of the young woman, the hog-monkeys scattered and Gyatso sat up.

"I was right," Malaya said.

"Roku's alive?" the Air Nomad asked, visibly relieved.

Malaya nodded, left hand resting on the hilt of her sheathed dagger out of habit. They had spent enough time together over the last few days to know she didn't need her weapon around him. "Ulo was showing your friend around the village yesterday. But he's injured. Had to lean against Ulo to walk."

Gyatso's relief shifted to concern. "What happened?"

"Not sure. Also, I still have no idea how he got there without passing me on the trail." Malaya hiked up her tolga skirt and sat down at the edge of the springs next to Gyatso, lowering her legs into the water, which was heated by volcanic vents. "But as I'd guessed, he had been shut up in Ulo's hut."

"Like a prisoner?"

"I'd thought so at first. But nobody stood guard, and when they eventually came out, they seemed friendly enough. Ulo walked Roku around the village, and then they returned to the hut."

"What did they talk about?"

"I couldn't get close enough to eavesdrop without the fog." Malaya leaned forward, filled her cupped hands with the hot water, and splashed it on her face. "But it just seemed like Ulo was showing Roku around."

Gyatso lifted himself out of the pool so he was on Malaya's level. Steam rose from his flushed skin, and he pulled his legs in to sit cross-legged. His knee pressed against the skin of her thigh, passing heat between them. She didn't shift.

Gyatso cleared his throat. “Why would Ulo keep him alive if he’s so intent on killing outsiders? Could Ulo know he’s the Avatar?”

“I don’t think so—unless Roku told him.”

Gyatso stroked his chin. “That does sound like something Roku would do . . . He thinks he’s a dragon guy.”

“Meaning?”

“Eh, too hard to explain. Anyway, do you think he needs to be rescued? If so, he’s lucky I didn’t leave the island. Turns out that’s kind of my specialty.”

“Maybe? I don’t trust Ulo. Even if he is keeping your friend alive, I would guess it’s not for a good reason. But we can’t just walk in there. Ulo rarely leaves him alone.”

“I’ll do whatever we need to do in order to keep Roku safe,” Gyatso said. “Except hurt, torture, kill—all of that kind of stuff, of course.”

Malaya looked at the Airbender in wonder. How different he was from Amihan, or anyone else in her clan for that matter.

On their first night together, he’d declined the Komodo-chicken skewer she’d roasted for him. He had explained that even though Air Nomads could eat meat when it was offered, he preferred not to. This had made Malaya laugh for the first time in days. Her own conviction that her clan shouldn’t kill the Earthbenders wasn’t based on some grand spiritual or moral guideline, but a vague—yet certain—feeling that they didn’t *deserve* to die. Humans aside, she couldn’t even begin to comprehend how someone who refused even to harm animals hadn’t yet died of malnutrition.

Gyatso had waited patiently for Malaya’s laughter to subside, then went on to explain that it was a central tenet of the entire nation of Air Nomads, which was the exact opposite of the menacing portrait Ulo had painted when telling stories about marauding bands of Airbenders. She wiped away tears that had formed at the corners of her eyes, then went on to interrogate Gyatso for the next hour about how such a people managed to survive alongside other nations more eager for war. By the end of their conversation, Malaya was far from a convert. Yet when she lay down to sleep that night—after she had peppered him with questions about the Air Nomads until his eyelids kept drooping closed—she thought of the roasted meat that filled her stomach with budding guilt.

Gyatso suddenly reached up toward Malaya's head, smiled, and plucked something from her short hair. A sampaguita blossom. He held it out for her to take, but she blew it away. Without missing a beat, he used his airbending to swirl the steam in a way that made the small flower flutter and dance around her head.

"Find out anything about the Earthbenders?" he asked as he continued guiding the air with graceful hand motions.

Malaya watched the sampaguita's hypnotic movements. Despite the fact he'd shared that he struggled to use his airbending except when Roku's life was in danger, it seemed to always work around her. "No sign of Yuming, Qixia, or the other Earthbenders," she said. "And I still haven't seen Amihan anywhere in or around the village."

"And Kilat?"

Malaya shook her head, trying not to dwell on what that might mean.

A moment later, one of the hog-monkeys hopped over, snatched the floating flower out of the air, stuffed it into its mouth, and ran away. Malaya laughed. Gyatso leaned back onto his hands and sighed.

"I never should have left Roku alone," Gyatso said. "If something happens to him, it will be all my fault."

"We'll save him. Then we'll find the Earthbenders and send them away. Then we'll stop Ulo and Amihan from taking any more innocent lives."

"We'll need a good plan."

Malaya smirked, eyeing the wild hog-monkeys that were gathered at the other end of the hot springs. "You think I don't already have one?"

He followed her gaze. "I can't wait to hear it." Then he turned back to her, eyebrows tilting in concern. "But you really think it's going to work?"

Malaya took Gyatso's nearest hand and laced her fingers through his. "We'll keep your friend safe."

Gyatso squeezed her hand and smiled.

She squeezed his hand back. "When you first told me about your people's philosophy of harmonies, you said that you and Roku had each lost someone important to you . . ."

"My older sister," Gyatso said before she could ask the question. "Yama."

"What was she like?"

Gyatso looked down and pulled his hand away.

Inwardly, Malaya cursed at herself. They'd known each other only a handful of days. In that brief time, she'd come to feel closer to him than to anyone in her clan. She'd taught him all about the island and about her people. She shared how she'd learned to never question certain things in order to survive. She described how she regretted that willful ignorance and had become determined to never go back to it—even if that meant that she was exiled from the village and had to live out the rest of her life alone on the other side of the island. She'd even told him why her relationship with her parents was so broken, a wound she'd never bared to another soul.

But who was to say he had come to feel anywhere near as close to her? Malaya was far better at tracking wild animals than social cues. She had been foolish to invite him to share his deepest pain so soon. "It's okay," she added, "you don't have to tell me."

But then, unexpectedly, the Air Nomad let out a joyful laugh.

"What?" Malaya asked, confused.

Gyatso looked up, smiling wide as he smoothed a hand over his scalp. "I'm sorry—it's just that I think I understand something Roku once told me."

"Oh?"

"He said I might need to learn to love Yama in a new way now that she's no longer with me. And now I think I get what he meant."

Malaya matched his smile, relieved that she had not unintentionally pushed the Air Nomad away.

And then Gyatso began to tell Malaya all about his sister.

THE DIFFERENCE

After the sea had swallowed Yasu, Roku moved out of the Academy dorms and went on leave for the remainder of the term. And much to the Fire Lord's dismay, so did Sozin.

Roku would wake in the morning to find Sozin sitting across the room on Yasu's bed. At Sozin's behest, they filled those gray days with reading and training and sharing meals and playing Pai Sho and walking all around the caldera and swapping stories of the daring Yasu who often failed to think things through, desperate to find tales unknown to the other. A messenger would occasionally appear at the doorstep of Roku's home, bearing a command from Fire Lord Taiso for Sozin to return to the Academy. But Sozin remained at Roku's side.

The Crown Prince of the Fire Nation had always been ambitious and driven, but he was more determined than ever to make the most of his life to honor Yasu's memory. If Yasu's death halved Roku, it doubled Sozin. If it made Roku retreat, it made Sozin advance. And since Roku's parents had withdrawn into their own sorrow, it was Sozin's buoying presence alone that held Roku's head above the water, then gradually carried him back to shore whether Roku wanted him to or not—and he often didn't.

Roku thought of all of this as he lay awake in Ulo's hut, unable to sleep. The old man was snoring softly on his rattan mat along the opposite wall. Outside, the rhythmic clicks and buzzing of insects in the surrounding valley filled the night.

He could not let Sozin down. Unfortunately, he was beginning to fear that Sister Disha had been correct about more than the fact that he needed to detach from the Fire Nation.

He still couldn't figure out a more diplomatically savvy approach to untangling the current situation than simply asking Ulo to spare the Earthbenders' lives, the Western Kingdom Trading Company to relinquish its interest in the island, and the Fire Lord to leave the Lambak clan to their

own devices. And now Roku had to figure out how he might handle his first encounter with a spirit as the Avatar.

He was not ready.

Not for any of this.

It doesn't matter if you're ready, Roku imagined Sozin telling him now. *Act like it.*

The only thing that matters is if you're willing, Yasu might have added.

Preparation is essential, Sister Disha might counter. *The difference between success and failure, life and death.*

He imagined Gyatso scoffing. *But you're already here—so now what?*

A shrill scream interrupted the spiraling of conflicting voices in his mind, followed by a chorus of more shouts as the air filled with the sound of clay shattering, wood splintering, and chaos otherwise ensuing.

In an instant, Ulo was awake and on his feet. “Stay here,” he told Roku before disappearing down the ladder, which itself disappeared a moment later. “Check on the grove,” Roku heard the old man command someone before running off.

Roku went to the doorway and looked outside. It was dark, but by the light of a few torches, he could see the problem: a pack of wild hog-monkeys was storming through the village. They were ripping apart baskets, smashing pots, scrambling up ladders, tearing through roofs and walls, and chasing villagers and livestock.

When Roku heard movement at the back entrance, he whirled around with fists up, ready to defend himself against one of the rampaging creatures with whatever strength or firebending he could muster. But he didn't have to.

“Gyatso?” he asked with a whorl of confusion, relief, and anger.

Gyatso hopped inside, stood, and tipped an imaginary hat. Holding his glider in one hand, he beckoned Roku over with the other. “Let's go,” he whispered.

Roku didn't move, the words of their last exchange still scorched on the air between them. “I thought you went back to the temple—what are you doing here?”

“I'm saving you, obviously. Again. But we need to get out of here before they deal with those hog-monkeys and Ulo returns.”

“You brought the hog-monkeys? And you know Ulo?”

“I’ll explain later.”

Roku stayed where he was, fists only half-lowered. “I don’t need to be saved.”

Gyatso crossed the room, speaking in an urgent hush. “Malaya said you might say that. But you’re wrong. Trust me.”

“Who’s Malaya?”

From nearby came a burst of clattering cookware and a woman’s scream.

“Again, I’ll tell you later. We have to get out of here.”

Roku’s eyes went to Gyatso’s glider, only now realizing that he’d reached the hut through flight. “Your airbending is back?”

Gyatso rubbed his face in frustration. “We. Can. Talk. Later.”

Outside, a cacophony of hog-monkey snorting screeches rose to a fever pitch.

Roku backed up. “I don’t know what you think is happening to me, but I’m fine—on the verge of cracking this whole situation wide open, actually.”

“Great, I can’t wait to hear about it.” Gyatso grabbed Roku by the upper arm and tried to pull the Avatar away. Roku, however, was much taller and stronger even in his weakened state.

“Listen to me,” Roku said as the Airbender kept pulling on him in vain, “Ulo’s starting to trust me. He’s telling me more and more about the island every day.”

Gyatso stepped back. “It’s all lies.”

“Maybe, but it doesn’t mean I can’t learn from him.”

“Not if he kills you first.”

Roku thought of all the opportunities the clan’s chief had already had, and the invitation to meet the cave spirit. “Why would he do that?”

“Malaya’s not sure yet.”

“Again—*who’s* Malaya?”

Gyatso ignored Roku. The sounds of chaos and screeching hog-monkeys were beginning to die down. “Roku, I know you’re still angry at me, but I need you to trust me.”

“And I need you to trust *me*,” Roku said. “I can’t leave the island until I figure all of this out.”

Gyatso's eyes darted to the hut's front entrance. "I came back to help you, not to drag you back to Sister Disha. Come with me for a bit—hear me out, then you can return to Ulo if you want."

Roku had already disappeared once a couple nights ago when he had ventured into the tunnels that led to the Sacred Cave. Ulo might not so easily let a second transgression slide. "What's Ulo going to think?"

Gyatso swirled his staff around, generating a small vortex that sent Roku's hair flying about his face as the wind toppled furniture, shattered pots, and knocked down the skulls and weapons hanging on the wall. When the air settled, Roku pushed his hair aside. The hut looked as though it had been thoroughly ransacked. "That a hog-monkey chased you out into the forest," Gyatso said.

They stared at each other. Outside, only a single hog-monkey still screeched while the villagers shouted directions at each other, struggling to shepherd it back into the forest. Ulo would be returning any moment.

"Fine," Roku said, as he crossed over to Gyatso. "But I *am* still mad at everything you said."

"The feeling's mutual . . . but I'm sorry."

They heard someone begin to ascend the bamboo ladder that led to the hut's front entrance. Roku and Gyatso rushed to the back entrance. They leapt out—Roku clinging to Gyatso, who clung to his glider—and sailed off into the darkness. As they soared away higher into the night sky, Roku peered over his shoulder. Ulo's head was peeking out, scanning the valley below.

NOT ALONE

Malaya sharpened her dagger in the darkness as she waited beneath the low-hanging, sprawling limbs of the ancient balet tree. She had completed her part of the plan by sneaking into the village and discretely scattering diced mangos—the wild hog-monkeys’ favorite food. Judging by the commotion in the distance that had ensued only a few minutes later, Gyatso had done his by using his airbending to waft the scent of the fruit throughout the forest until it lured as many of the creatures as possible to the village. Everything had settled down since then, so she expected Gyatso and the Avatar at any moment.

Sure enough, Malaya soon heard rustling through the undergrowth. Confident the approach was too noisy to be Amihan, she stowed the whetstone and slipped her dagger into the open-faced wooden sheath strapped to her thigh. Then she cupped her hands over her mouth and imitated the rapid low coos of a valley dove to confirm. The response signal came soon after—a poor echo of her expert imitation despite all their practice.

Moving with deft silence, Malaya went to meet them before they got too lost in the surrounding forest. She saw Gyatso and Roku before they saw her. The Avatar seemed much healthier than the last time she’d spied him from a distance leaning on Ulo, but his movements were still stiff and labored.

Roku and Gyatso startled when they finally noticed Malaya approaching. Roku rushed to gather his composure to pretend like he hadn’t been caught unaware, while Gyatso lit up in a way that made Malaya blush. Thank the cave spirit for the darkness.

“And I thought Airbenders were quiet,” Gyatso said. “Promise me you’ll never become an assassin?”

Malaya shrugged. “Depends on the pay.”

“You must be Malaya.” The corner of Roku’s mouth lifted in a small smile, apparently amused at the easiness they shared. “Gyatso’s told me

absolutely nothing about you.” Then, winded from their hurried escape, he sat down in a nook formed by the tree’s buttress root and leaned back. “I’m Roku. But you must already know that.”

Gyatso tossed Roku a waterskin. The Avatar drank deeply and passed it back. He then produced a small flame in the palm of his hand that lit the clearing under the tree. “There—now we can see properly,” he said, reminding Malaya of the outsiders’ poor vision.

It was strange to stand before Roku. On the darkest of nights, Ulo enjoyed telling the clan stories he’d gathered on his travels about the different Avatars. They were largely haunting cautionary tales about the dangers of unchecked power. Gyatso had confirmed Malaya’s suspicions that there was little truth in this, but the image of the Avatar as a glorified executioner lingered in her mind as she returned the boy’s gaze.

“So, what happened to you?” Gyatso asked Roku.

Roku shook his head in disbelief then quickly summarized how he’d ended up in the clan chief’s hut. When he finished, Gyatso filled Roku in on his end of events since they’d parted ways.

“So you realized you were wrong?” Roku asked.

Gyatso scoffed. “I realized you wouldn’t stand a chance without me.”

There was an edge to their words, but something softer cushioned the exchange. Despite their lingering resentments, they cared deeply for each other. Malaya wondered what it felt like to share such a mutual bond with someone and hoped someday she might know.

With everyone caught up, Roku turned to Malaya. “And you think your clan’s going to kill me?”

Malaya hesitated. She had come to know Gyatso, but Roku was still a stranger to her.

“Go on,” Gyatso encouraged, intuiting the source of her hesitation. “I vouch for him.”

Roku arched an eyebrow. “You do?”

“For some reason.”

And so Malaya told the Avatar about her responsibilities as one of the clan’s scouts, ending with the unsettling discovery of a part of the job that had been previously unknown to her—killing all outsiders who trespassed on the island.

Roku stroked a couple of wispy hairs sprouting from his chin as if it were an actual beard. “Then why is Ulo keeping me alive? He’s had plenty of opportunities to end me if he really wanted to.” His questions were genuine, as if he’d suspected something was amiss and had already been wondering all of this.

“I’ve been trying to figure that out,” she said. “But I know Ulo is determined to do to whatever it takes to keep the island secret from the outside world.”

“And what about the Earthbenders? I’ve been in your village for days—wouldn’t I know if there’d been some kind of fight?”

“Not necessarily,” she said, and told him about Amihan.

He looked at Gyatso. “That clears up that part of Oh Wen’s story. Speaking of which, was he doing okay when you left him?”

Gyatso nodded. “I cleaned him up, replaced his bandages, and made sure he had plenty of provisions. He wasn’t eager to encounter Amihan again, so he said he was going to return to their ship and wait for the rest of his group to finish their business.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Roku said. “Even if he did try to kill us. But we have to make sure the Earthbenders leave *without* finishing their business.” And he explained a theory that the Western Kingdom Trading Company’s search for some special mineral or rock was a front for the Earth Kingdom’s pursuit of the cave’s power.

“That makes sense,” Malaya said, hating to admit it. Ulo may have been right after all about the threat Yuming and Qixia’s curiosity posed. Still, that doesn’t mean he was right about the solution. And there remained the matter of why Ulo was leaving Roku alive.

Gyatso glanced nervously at Malaya before taking a centering breath and turning to Roku. “And if your theory is right, the cave’s power might also be the real reason Sozin’s interested in the island.”

The flame in Roku’s hand flared, making Gyatso and Malaya take a step back from the surge of heat. “Not this again,” the Avatar said. He extinguished the fire, then stood and turned toward the balet tree’s corded trunk as darkness returned.

“Yes, this again,” Gyatso said. “I know you don’t want to hear it because he’s your best friend—but you’re the Avatar; you can’t forget even for a moment that he’s also the future leader of the Fire Nation.”

Roku whirled around. “What do you have against Sozin?”

Gyatso smoothed a hand over his head as he looked to Malaya, who had helped him shave that morning with her dagger. His other hand was gripping his staff so tightly, his knuckles had gone white. She could sense he was seconds from storming angrily away and knew this time he would not come back for the Avatar. With her eyes, Malaya pleaded for the Air Nomad to try again.

“Tell him about Yama,” Malaya prompted, knowing Gyatso had revealed less about his sister to Roku than he had to her.

Roku waited.

Gyatso’s jaw clenched—then he relaxed his grip on his staff and took a step toward the Avatar. When he spoke again, his voice was low and soft.

“She was two years older than me,” Gyatso said. “Last year, she was on a relief mission in the southwest of the Earth Kingdom. The Western Kingdom Trading Company—the same company that sent those Earthbenders here—had been mining outside of this one village for years. They had ruined the soil, poisoned the water, broken the land. Those who couldn’t afford to move away stayed and kept working in the mines. They started to get sick. And the more they worked, the sicker they became. Soon, nearly the entire village was dying. Yama and the other Air Nomads had basically gone to care for these people before they died.”

Gyatso took a deep breath and leaned on his staff, as if overburdened by the weight of his story. “The dying miners didn’t matter to the company. They’d outlived their use. The coal or ore or whatever had nearly run out, and the company was preparing to leave. But they must have dug too much or too deep. A sinkhole opened. It swallowed a huge chunk of the mountainside—including the village in which Yama and a few of the other Air Nomads had been helping.” Gyatso paused. “There were no survivors.”

The fight went out of Roku’s eyes. He unclenched his fists. “I’m sorry, Gyatso.”

“I’m not telling you this for your sympathy,” Gyatso said. “I want you to understand that I get it. Not just the sadness you carry from Yasu’s death—but the anger.” He shook his head. “I’ve been so angry for so long. At the Western Kingdom Trading Company, who only cared about their profits. At the Council of Elders, who decided there was nothing to be done besides meditate on the tragedy. At myself, for not being on that trip with her

because I had asked permission to stay behind to focus on my airbending training to master the next tier.”

Roku stood stunned. Malaya imagined he was thinking about all the ways anger echoed throughout his own life after his twin brother’s death. Including the way it must have shaped his reactions to the accusation Gyatso leveled at Sozin.

“You told me I needed to learn to love Yama in a new way now that she was gone, and I think I have,” Gyasto added. “I told Malaya all about her, and I felt better. Lighter. Freer. And after all this is over, I’d love to tell you more about my sister than how she died. And I’d love to hear more about Yasu.”

Roku swallowed, then nodded. “I’d like that too.”

“You helped me see my situation more clearly. I just want to help you do the same. You know Prince Sozin better than anyone else in the world, Roku. Please. Be honest with us—and yourself. Is there any chance he would try to use the Sacred Cave’s power if he knew about it?”

Roku looked away. “It’s possible . . . Even if I don’t want to believe it. But I promise, I’ll confront him about it when the time is right.”

Gyatso didn’t gloat. He didn’t press the issue. He simply nodded. Trusted.

Roku stepped forward and embraced Gyatso. They held each other for a long time. Malaya felt like an intruder to their intimacy, but it was a beautiful thing to witness. In her sixteen years, nobody had ever held her like that.

“May Yama’s flame light our way,” Roku said, still holding Gyatso.

“And may Yasu’s do the same,” Gyatso said.

They pulled apart and looked at each other. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t have made it this far without you,” Roku said. “And I don’t think I’ll make it much farther unless you stay by my side. You’re not a failed Airbender. Your pain and anger are still fresh. Like you said, I get that. But I also get what it’s like to long for healing, and I’m happy you’re finding a way forward.”

Gyatso nodded. “I’m sorry too. Your hair doesn’t look that stupid.” They laughed, then Gyatso continued, “In all seriousness, I’m sorry I said you weren’t the right Avatar. Our elders teach us that the Avatar is always the exact person the world needs at that given moment. Kyoshi’s light found

you for a specific reason, even if you can't see why yet. I have faith in that. I have faith in you."

"That means a lot to me," Roku said. "Too bad Sister Disha doesn't share that faith."

"What are you talking about?"

"When we were arguing, you said that she was right."

Gyatso paused for a moment, remembering. "Oh—I didn't mean that she was right that it was a mistake for you to be the Avatar. I meant that she was right that you wouldn't be able to truly see yourself as the Avatar until you stopped seeing yourself first as a Fire National."

"Really?"

"Really."

Roku glowed with relief. Then resolve settled over his face, and his attention shifted to Malaya. "As for the Earthbenders, the other night Ulo said he had to deal with pressing clan matters," Roku said. "Something about a beetle infestation at the grove on the other side of the valley. It seemed like a lie, but maybe it had something to do with the Earthbenders."

"There is a grove on the other side of the valley," Malaya said, "so maybe that's where they are."

"You think they're still there?" Gyatso asked. And then added more tentatively, "Alive?"

Malaya readjusted the bow slung over her shoulder. "I hope so. There's been no sign of Amihan, so maybe she's still trying to hunt them down. The only way to know for sure is to go over there and see what we find."

Roku said, "Then you two head there."

"What are you going to do?" Malaya asked.

"Return to the village."

Malaya and Gyatso exchanged a confused look.

Roku clarified. "If I stay with you two, Ulo will try to find me. But if I go back, that will leave you free to go to the grove and investigate."

"Sounds good . . . but did you forget he's planning to kill you?" Gyatso asked.

"I'm not sure about that," Roku said. "He's invited me to meet the cave spirit when the sun reaches its zenith during tomorrow's equinox."

Malaya's eyes widened for a second time as the last piece of the puzzle clicked into place—with everything going on, she had forgotten tomorrow

was the equinox.

“What is it?” Gyatso asked, recognizing her look of sudden realization.

“What do you know about the ghost spider?” she asked them.

“Absolutely nothing,” said Roku.

Gyatso nudged Roku with his elbow. “He’s mostly into dragons.”

Roku narrowed his eyes at the Air Nomad.

Malaya ignored whatever that was. “Unlike most other spiders, the ghost spider doesn’t trap its prey with a web. Instead, it hangs down from the forest canopy, drops onto its target, and then sinks its fangs into the poor creature, injecting it with venom. The venom doesn’t kill—it paralyzes the creature while turning its organs to mush.”

Roku wrinkled his nose. Gyatso listened, rapt at the infinite wonders of the world.

Malaya continued. “The ghost spider then pulls the paralyzed prey back to its nest to feed its babies, a process made possible by the freshly liquefied innards.”

Roku glanced down at his stomach. “You think Ulo’s going to melt my insides, then eat me?”

“In a way,” Malaya said. “Nobody in our clan besides Ulo knows much about the equinox ritual that’s supposedly responsible for maintaining Yungib’s goodwill—except that it requires sacrifices. I’m wondering if he’s not planning to take any pig-chickens or cow-pigs with him tomorrow.”

Roku pointed at himself.

Malaya nodded. It explained why he’d been keeping Roku alive.

Roku let out a long, slow exhale, then turned to Gyatso. “You probably know more about the Spirit World than I do since you’re an Air Nomad. Are there spirits that accept human sacrifices like that?”

“I don’t think it’s likely.” Gyatso smoothed a hand over his head. “But there are definitely humans out there who mistakenly think blood sacrifices can earn the favor of certain spirits.”

Roku sighed. “And what could be a juicier sacrifice than the Avatar?”

“He probably believes it will allow him to access even more of Yungib’s power,” Malaya noted.

A silence settled over the group as they considered the reality of the situation—and the difficulty of figuring out what to do next.

Gyatso turned to Roku. “Still want to go back to the village by yourself?”

“No. But I have to if you’re going to find the Earthbenders.” Roku turned to Malaya. “Maybe I can even find a way to persuade him to stop murdering outsiders.”

“Promise me you won’t kill him,” Gyatso said.

Roku hesitated.

“It will only make things worse.”

“I promise,” Roku eventually said, but he didn’t look like he agreed. Malaya certainly didn’t. How else could her clan be free of Ulo’s influence?

“Thank you.” Gyatso turned to Malaya. “What do you think—Roku handles Ulo while we go find the Earthbenders?”

The question caught her off guard. He was waiting for her approval as if she were part of the team. And Roku was looking at her in the same way. She thought of Gyatso’s philosophy of harmonies, about how each of them was vibrating and resonating. She had been skeptical at first, but maybe there was something to it. As they both waited for her answer, she felt an unfamiliar sense of belonging, an understanding of who she was supposed to be.

She nodded.

“Then it’s settled.” Roku moved between them and rested a hand atop each of their shoulders. “Doesn’t it feel good to know we’re not alone?”

FIRES MEANT TO FORGE

Sozin stood at the ship's prow and stared at the mountainous island in absolute confusion. It sat on the horizon no longer covered in fog, dark storm clouds gathering above. He double-checked the coordinates on the map and returned to the helm where the junk's pirate captain steered the ship.

"You're certain this is the same island you took me to a few weeks ago?" he asked.

"Aye." She let out a bark of laughter. "You think that fog was going to last forever?"

Sozin ignored her slight and returned to his rented cabin below the main deck. Kozaru and Dalisay were inside the cramped space, taking turns throwing knives at a target Kozaru had burned onto the planks of the wall.

"The fog's gone," he said.

Kozaru threw a fire dagger that sizzled through the air and scorched the wood far left of the target's outer ring. "That'll make it easier to row ashore this time," she said.

Sozin turned to Dalisay. "What do you think is going on?"

"Hmm." She touched the tip of a knife to her chin as she considered the question. "I might be able to venture a guess if you actually told me anything about the island or why we've returned in such a rush with those eel-hounds in the hold for which you inexplicably paid a small fortune."

Sozin sighed. And, at long last, he entrusted his companions with the full story. Well, not the *full* story. He emphasized wanting to save Avatar Roku from the murderous natives but left out his unpleasant discovery that—contrary to Ashō's account—the enhanced bending power he sought could only be accessed within their so-called Sacred Cave. Which, of course, rendered his whole mission pointless.

When Sozin finished talking, Kozaru merely shrugged, while Dalisay's eyes narrowed in concentration.

“The disappearance of the fog must mean the Avatar failed,” Dalisay concluded after processing everything within a few seconds. “The Earthbenders must have killed the natives and seized the source of power.” She spun her knife, then flung it at the target, missing the exact center by a finger’s width. She frowned.

Sozin pulled out the knife and idly twirled it as he leaned against the wall.

Dalisay might be right. Maybe they were too late. They’d managed to make it back to the western coast of the Earth Kingdom in a fraction of the time it had taken them to reach Wan Shi Tong’s library thanks to the eel-hounds. But sky bison and dragons weren’t so easily bought—despite Kozaru’s surprising number of contacts in the illegal animal trade—so there was no faster way to cross the sea than by boat. Sozin’s mouth soured with the unfamiliar taste of failure. If something happened to Roku at the hands of either the Earthbenders or the natives, it would be his fault.

His father would insist on an investigation. He’d only told Ta Min as much as Roku, but she’d reveal his instigating role in the events. The Fire Lord would not be pleased—to put it mildly—to discover that his own son had gone behind his back, leading to the demise of the first Fire Avatar in centuries and sending the reincarnation on to the useless Air Nomads.

His father wouldn’t go so far as to remove his birthright. There was no other potential heir besides Zeisan, and his sister had the double misfortune of being born female and a non-bender. There would certainly be punishment, though. A loss of status or rank. The removal of the few responsibilities he had barely been entrusted with. Shame made public. Maybe even some kind of temporary exile until he restored his honor. Throughout history, the royal family had always been fond of such methods of discipline. Fires meant to forge.

But these potential consequences were not Sozin’s deeper fear. The simple truth was that he did not know what he would do without Roku. It had been difficult enough to move past Yasu’s death. And though Sozin had struggled to adjust after Roku had abandoned him to begin his training, imagining a world without his closest remaining friend shook him to his core. The day Yasu had been swept out to sea, Sozin had sworn to the spirits that he’d protect the remaining brother no matter what.

“Prince Sozin,” Dal said, pulling Sozin back to the present. “The knife.”

Sozin looked down at his hand to see the blade was glowing red hot. He cocked his arm back and chucked it at the target. The point struck the exact center of the bull's-eye and quivered as the heated metal seared the wood and sent up a thin curl of smoke.

No, Sozin decided. Dalisay was wrong. It was not too late to save Roku. He would not fail.

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THE PLAN

“There,” Malaya said, pointing up to the canopy as she and Gyatso hid behind a massive tree trunk. “You see them?”

“Sure.” Gyatso squinted up through the predawn darkness. “Actually, no. I can’t see anything except branches and leaves. How are your eyes so good?”

“How are yours so bad?”

“Just tell me what I’m supposed to see.”

“The Earthbenders are in bamboo cages high in the trees.” It was the perfect place to imprison them. The sentinel Greywoods were tall enough to keep the Earthbenders out of reach from their element. “I can’t believe I hadn’t thought to check this place before.”

“At least they’re still alive,” Gyatso consoled.

“Kilat’s also up there,” Malaya said, as relieved to spot the gorilla-tarsier as she was angered at the sight of her trapped in the undersized but doubly reinforced cage.

“How do you think she captured all of them singlehandedly?” Gyatso asked, squinting as he scanned the canopy to try to see what Malaya saw.

But that wasn’t the most pressing question to Malaya. The scouts knew the island better than anyone. Amihan would have had no problem ambushing them. “I’m wondering why they’re still alive.”

“Maybe Ulo wants to sacrifice them too?”

Malaya shook her head. “Not if they’re being kept all the way out here.” Then she voiced the other thing that troubled her. “And where’s Amihan?”

Two people patrolled the area at the base of the tall trees carrying torches, but neither was the Airbender. “That scrawny Firebender in the wanoh loincloth is Kamao, son of Baku the blacksmith,” she told Gyatso as she pointed out the boy. “He can’t walk past me without asking if I want to hold his ‘spear.’”

“I dislike him already.”

Malaya then lifted her chin in the direction of the other guard, a burly woman with short black hair and a spear. As usual, the woman wore a wano loincloth beneath her black sleeveless tunic despite the fact it was typically reserved for men. “And that’s Mamamaril. She taught me most of what I know about hand-to-hand combat.”

“I hope I don’t have to fight her,” Gyatso said. “What’s the plan?”

Malaya unshouldered her bow. “I’m going to shoot through the ropes holding the cages in place.”

“And then?”

“Um. They’ll fall.”

“These trees must be two—maybe three—hundred feet high. No way they’d survive.”

Malaya elbowed Gyatso playfully in the ribs. “That’s where your airbending comes in.”

“Ah,” he said. “You want me to cushion their fall somehow.”

“Think you can do it?” she asked, knowing that he’d had no problem at all with his airbending ever since he’d told her all about Yama.

Gyatso nodded.

“Just be careful not to soften their landing so much that the cages don’t break,” she added. “I’m depending on them helping us against Kamao and Mamamaril after they’re free.”

Gyatso looked up. “And Amihan?”

Malaya scanned the treetops as she drew five arrows from the quiver at her hip. “We hope she’s nowhere nearby.”

“Indeed.”

Malaya carefully lined up and nocked the arrows as she stepped out from behind the tree. She raised her bow.

“Wait,” Gyatso said as he scrambled to his feet. “I still can’t see—”

Malaya took a breath, aimed, and fired.

FULCRUM

Ulo woke before dawn. The clan's chief—believing Roku to still be asleep—quietly slipped out of the hut and began to speak to someone below in hushed tones. He spoke too softly for Roku to make out anything they were saying. A few minutes later, the conversation ended, footsteps receded, and then Ulo climbed back up the ladder, carrying a gourd sloshing with water.

“Everything okay?” Roku asked as he sat up, pretending that the noise had just awoken him.

Ulo nodded. “Everyone's excited is all. Today's a big day.” He moved over to the corner of the living space and lit the coals. He poured water from the gourd into a pot, then stepped back. “How are you feeling?”

“Better.” Roku coughed a few times. “But still not back to my full energy,” he lied.

“In time.” Ulo nodded and went to the window as the water warmed. “If anyone should appreciate the equinox, it's the Avatar, eh? A day of perfect balance between daylight and darkness. A fulcrum, like you.”

“I've always preferred the summer solstice,” Roku said. “But you make a compelling case.”

When the water started to boil, Ulo prepared the dried moon-blooming sampaguita leaves. He filled a cup using his waterbending, let the leaves steep, then handed it to Roku. Roku sat up, bowed his head as he accepted it, lifted the cup to his lips—then hesitated.

Ulo was always pushing the tea on Roku, but had Roku ever seen Ulo drink it himself?

Roku didn't think so.

Then he remembered Malaya's description of the ghost spider and the way it paralyzed its prey. Maybe Roku's prolonged low energy wasn't purely an aftereffect of entering the Sacred Cave without training. Maybe there was something in the tea slowing his recovery.

He pretended to drink, then lowered the cup and sighed with satisfaction. “Delicious.”

Ulo smiled. “Isn’t it, though?”

Roku nodded. Faked another sip. “What should I expect when we meet Yungib?”

Ulo stroked his beard. “The cave spirit will appear when the sun is directly overhead, visible through the crevice in the ceiling. Then we will begin the ritual.”

The sacrifice, Roku thought, if Malaya was correct. “Anything I need to do?”

“Close your eyes, focus, and center yourself. Its energy will be overwhelming. Even more so than when you stepped into the cavern.”

“Sure, meditate. Simple enough.”

“And while I am performing the ritual, do not try to use your bending under any circumstances. Not even a spark. The results could be catastrophic. I’m guessing you were able to survive without training before because you are the Avatar. But in the presence of the cave spirit, that might not be enough.”

Eyes closed. No bending. That wasn’t suspicious at all. “Got it. And then what? After you’ve done your thing, you’ll tell me when it’s okay to open my eyes, and I’ll speak with the spirit?”

Ulo shook his head. “We’ll meditate, and it will be more like communing. Perhaps a bit like entering the Spirit World, which I’m sure you know all about as Avatar.”

Roku pretended to take another sip of tea. “Sure.”

“When the sun shifts and its light moves away from the hill at the center of the Sacred Cave, our time with Yungib will come to an end, and the cave spirit will depart, leaving enough of its energy to last our benders until the next equinox.”

“So what happens if you don’t complete the ritual?” Roku asked. “No extra bending power for half a year?”

Ulo nodded, then went back to the hut’s front entrance. The sun was rising, lighting the eastern sky beyond the valley. Roku took advantage of his distraction and emptied his cup out the back entrance.

Ulo turned around a moment later. “So, big day, indeed. Clean up, have some breakfast, and enjoy the morning’s festivities. I’m going to take care of some final preparations, then when I return, you and I will head to the Sacred Cave.”

Roku faked a smile. “Can’t wait.”

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THE TEETH OF THE TRAP

As soon as Malaya loosed her array of arrows, Gyatso leapt out from behind the tree and spun around as he swung his staff. His motions stirred the air into a series of whirling spirals that followed each shot. Ropes snapped, people screamed, and bamboo shattered as the cages crashed to the ground and Kamao and Mamamaril shouted in surprised confusion.

The Earthbenders groaned as they picked themselves up, and relief washed over Malaya—her aim had been true, and Gyatso had perfectly timed his airbending, so they had not sent everyone plunging to their deaths.

But then the Earthbenders turned and ran away.

“Welp,” Gyatso said.

Malaya shrugged it off, shouldered her bow, and let out a loud, piercing whistle. Kilat appeared at Malaya’s side in an instant, looking disoriented from her fall but elated to be reunited with her companion. They quickly hugged, then the gorilla-tarsier swung Malaya onto her velvety back.

“Where’s mine?” Gyatso asked.

“Eh, you have that cool staff,” Malaya said. “Keep Kamao and Mamamaril busy—Amihan has to be around here somewhere.”

She tapped Kilat’s right shoulder once, and the gorilla-tarsier latched onto the nearest tree and swiftly ascended. When they reached the canopy, Malaya tapped Kilat’s shoulder twice and they came to a stop. Malaya surveyed the surrounding area as pale dawn light leaked through the canopy of towering Greywoods.

But after only a few moments, her concern for Gyatso got the better of her and pulled her attention downward.

Suppressing the dizziness that came with being able to see all the way to the ground, she saw that Gyatso had placed himself between her two clansmen and the fleeing Earthbenders and was gracefully evading their attacks. The Air Nomad ducked over an arcing fire kick, weaved in and out of a series of spear thrusts, twirled his staff to dispel a stream of flames, and

back-flipped away from a rushing strike. Then Gyatso blew a gust of air that sent the Firebender flying back like a leaf in the wind. But Mamamaril slipped behind Gyatso and chucked her spear at his back.

Malaya reached for her bow—but the Air Nomad pivoted away and knocked the spear aside with his staff just before it struck him.

Okay. The Airbender could handle himself.

But Kamao was back on his feet. Malaya drew her bow and fired. The arrow pierced the boy's right shoulder, sending him stumbling to the ground as he cried out in pain. She nocked another arrow, aimed it at Mamamaril, who was still trying to impale Gyatso, and released. It whistled through the air on its way to its target—and then it veered sharply to the left and sunk into the side of a Greywood. Malaya realized why the arrow had been sent off course a moment before a blast of air pushed her off Kilat.

Malaya caught a branch, swung herself around, then landed on top in a crouch. She whistled for Kilat, but the gorilla-tarsier didn't appear. She looked up—Kilat was wrestling with Amihan's gorilla-tarsier high in the branches overhead. Growling and hissing, the two creatures were a tangled blur of claws and teeth. They came apart long enough for Kilat to leap away to the next tree before crashing back together again only to leap away again in the next instant.

She understood now. The captured Earthbenders were bait, and Malaya had stepped right into the teeth of the trap.

There was a sharp, quick hiss, then searing pain ripped across Malaya's shoulder as if she'd been slashed by an invisible knife. Malaya gritted her teeth and spun around. Amihan was balanced atop a neighboring branch with her raised hands positioned to strike again. "Finally," she said, grinning, "a real challenge."

Malaya turned and leapt down to another branch just as another hissing blade of air sliced through the one she'd been standing on.

Ignoring the laceration on her shoulder, Malaya channeled her inner gorilla-tarsier and scrambled up the tree. Jets of concentrated air bit at her heels, carving, cutting, and shredding the tree in her wake.

Desperate and nearing the top, Malaya sprinted the length of the next branch and dove toward the neighboring tree despite the fact it was too distant to reach.

"Gyatso!" she yelled, fighting her panic as she started to drop.

“Got you!” the Air Nomad shouted back.

A moment later, a strong wind from below caught Malaya and swept her forward. She floated into the next tree and alighted onto a thick branch like an oversized hawk, amazed at how Airbending could be as soft as a cloud or as sharp as a knife.

“Nice trick,” called Amihan from the branch overhead. Dagger drawn, she pounced at Malaya.

Malaya blocked Amihan’s knife hand with her own forearm, twisted it away, and kneed the woman in her side, making her stumble back on the branch a few steps as she regained her balance.

Malaya drew her own dagger. She would have to keep Amihan close and constantly engaged so she couldn’t take advantage of her bending. “We don’t have to do this.”

“But I want to.” Amihan grinned—then sprang forward.

Metal flashed as their two daggers sliced and stabbed and carved through the narrow space between their bodies, often missing—but sometimes not. With their feet focused on balancing, their upper bodies became a flurry of attacks and blocks and counterstrikes. Forearms and hands and elbows blocked and locked, twisted and pushed aside. The older scout had years of additional experience, but Malaya had the speed and agility of youth and all she’d learned from sparring with Mamamaril since she was a small girl.

“I warned Ulo we couldn’t trust you to be a scout,” Amihan said as she spun away from Malaya’s next strike and swung down to a lower branch. “You ask too many questions.”

“And you don’t ask enough.”

Amihan chopped her hand, sending a jet of air slashing across Malaya’s knife hand. Malaya lost her grip at the sudden blooming of pain, dropped her weapon, swiped for it, missed, then watched it fall away.

Amihan grinned again. With another chop, she used her air-bending to slice through Malaya’s branch, forcing Malaya to hop onto hers. Not wasting a breath, the Airbender attacked. Unarmed, Malaya was forced onto the defensive. She ducked and dodged and blocked and spun away, sometimes moving only a millisecond before Amihan’s blade would have sliced into skin, sometimes feeling the sting of having moved a breath too late. She retreated until she reached the Greywood’s trunk, then slipped

around to the other side, keeping the tree between them as Amihan continued to slash and thrust at her.

“How many people have you killed for Ulo over the years?” Malaya asked as she slid around the tree and Amihan’s blade sunk into the bark where Malaya’s face had been.

“As many as he asked me to.” Amihan yanked her knife free with a grunt, then slashed at Malaya, but the girl swung around the trunk and out of the knife’s way once more. The blade again sank into the wood—but this time it stuck.

Malaya kicked Amihan in the chest, sending the woman stumbling back and almost slipping off the branch. Malaya yanked the dagger free. “You’re not going to take any more lives.”

Amihan caught herself and sneered. “Then you’re putting our entire clan in danger.”

Malaya sprang forward and went on the offensive. Amihan blocked most of Malaya’s frenzied, swinging strikes, but she was at a clear disadvantage without a weapon. Her breathing grew heavier, her reactions slower. Metal bit into flesh—once, twice, three times. Amihan began to back away as her forearms bruised and bled.

As Malaya steeled herself to end the fight, Amihan slipped. She hit her head on the branch with a sickening thud, then fell limply toward the ground. But Amihan’s gorilla-tarsier leapt through the air, caught the Airbender, and carried her away.

Malaya felt a twinge of disappointment as she watched the pair disappear into the distance. She wiped the blood from the dagger, sheathed it, and whistled for Kilat. It took longer than usual, but Kilat eventually arrived. Like her rider, the gorilla-tarsier was breathing hard and bore her own share of small injuries. They gave each other a nod of mutual relief, then Malaya climbed on, and Kilat descended the tree so Malaya could help Gyatso.

When they caught back up to the Air Nomad, though, there was nothing left to do. Kamao and Mamamaril were unconscious and bound together. Gyatso lay on his back nearby, idly blowing a leaf into the air, letting it flutter down, then blowing it back upward.

Malaya guided Kilat over and snatched Gyatso’s leaf out of the air. “Thanks for helping with Amihan.”

Gyatso sat up. "It seemed like you had it under control."

"Apparently, so did you." Malaya nodded toward Kamao and Mamamaril.

"I didn't want to brag before, but I'm a pretty good Air-bender." He lifted his staff and executed a few complicated twirling motions.

Malaya looked toward where the Earthbenders had escaped. Maybe they were fleeing to their ship, maybe they weren't. Either way, that direction led to the village, so she and Gyatso weren't done yet.

She scooted forward on Kilat to make space, then offered a hand to help him up.

The Air Nomad's face broke into a wide smile as he took her hand. "Finally."

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FAVORED BY THE SPIRITS

Ulo led Roku through the labyrinthine lava tubes toward the Sacred Cave. They walked in silence, honoring the solemnity of the approaching moment, their way lit by Ulo's lamp and the small flame Roku held in his palm.

It had been a celebratory morning. The villagers had gathered at sunrise for communal prayers and meditations. They shared a hearty feast of fried eggs, rice, spiced Komodo-chicken sausage, fried bangus fish, and a variety of fruits and nuts. The children put on a performance reenacting the Awakening of Yungib, then there had been dancing accompanied by gongs and flutes. Lastly, Ulo met with each villager individually, gathering their prayer requests to deliver to Yungib.

Throughout it all, the chief was kind, gentle, and patient. The picture of a compassionate leader. Roku guessed that most people in the clan did not share Malaya's moral resolve, and that even if they knew of the blood spilled throughout the centuries to maintain their clan's peaceful isolation, many would likely stand behind the old man. They would certainly not be the first or last people in the history of the world willing to trade a pile of bodies for their own safety.

The Fire National in Roku firmly believed in the right of a people to defend themselves with force when necessary. But the more he thought about it, the surer he felt it was unnecessary in this instance. Trespassing—intentionally or otherwise—was not grounds for summary execution. One could not take another's life simply because they feared a harm that had yet to happen. He had to find a way to stop Ulo from murdering the Earthbenders and any other outsiders his clan encountered in the future.

The chief's approach wouldn't even protect the clan in the long term. Ulo had admitted to Roku that more people had been finding the island in recent years—which Roku now understood meant more victims sacrificed for their secret. Sooner or later, someone would notice and come for their dead.

By that logic, Roku realized something else: He needed to keep the promise he'd half-heartedly made to Gyatso. Ending Ulo would stop the killings in the short term, but it would only make things worse in the long run by engendering further fear and hatred of outsiders among the rest of the Lambak clan.

Of course, Roku had no idea how he was going to stop himself from becoming a literal sacrifice without killing Ulo. The best he could think of was to leverage his identity as the Avatar to try to appeal to Yungib and convince the spirit to stop trading power to the clan in exchange for human sacrifices. If that didn't work, he'd have to find a way to stop Ulo's ritual and then escape and regroup with Gyatso and Malaya.

"We're almost there, Avatar," Ulo said as they rounded a corner.

Roku nodded and kept walking. Soon, the air grew draftier and damper. The low hum of energy he had felt the last time he had been underground returned, coursing through his spirit and making the flame he was casting to light his way again become effortless. As Roku recalled the sensation of overwhelming power, the dual sense of temptation and terror crept back in.

Eventually, they reached the end of the tunnel. Ulo paused, and they both took in the sight beyond the glow of their flames. Since fog no longer blanketed the island, the vast space was glowing from the angled shaft of sunlight that spilled through the crevice at the center of the domed ceiling. Assuming Ulo was telling the truth, Yungib would appear when that light fell directly on the hill at the cave's center. By Roku's estimate, that moment was minutes away.

Ulo turned to Roku. "Are you ready?"

Roku nodded, ready to reach for the energy flowing through him.

"Before we proceed, there's something I must confess."

"Oh?" Roku wondered exactly how Ulo was planning to sacrifice him. Did he plan the kill for before, during, or after the ritual? Would he even do it himself, or would Yungib handle it?

Ulo's somber blue eyes held Roku's gaze. "The clan believes I meet with Yungib each equinox. That I make the necessary offerings and sacrifices, pass on their prayer requests, and consult with the cave spirit on matters concerning the island. But that is not what happens."

Roku raised his eyebrows to feign surprise.

“It is true that the spirit comes to the cave. Its undeniable presence fills the entire space.”

“Yet?”

“Yet, nobody knows why it comes. As far as any of our clan’s chiefs have ever known, it’s not possible to speak with Yungib, no matter what offerings and sacrifices we make. Since they are meaningless, we stopped doing them long ago.”

“Did you now?” Roku said flatly.

Ulo nodded. “I tell the clan otherwise because it reassures them. People long to know that they are special, that they are favored by the spirits. When they feel such comfort, they are far less likely to question their leaders, and we are free to do what must be done.”

“To control them.”

“To keep them safe. And I trust you will keep this between you and me so that I may continue to do so.”

“If you can’t speak with Yungib and believe your offerings are meaningless, then why do you need to come here at all?” Roku asked.

“Couldn’t you just walk out of the village after the festivities and then relax in the hot springs for a few hours?”

“Though we don’t understand why the spirit arrives each equinox, the ritual *is* necessary for siphoning the spiritual energy to fill the Sacred Cave before Yungib’s departure,” Ulo explained. Then he cleared his throat and placed a rough hand on Roku’s shoulder. “And I have a theory that we might be able to transfer that energy into you. As the Avatar, you might be the only person alive strong enough to carry it after you step out of this cavern.”

“Meaning?”

“Imagine permanently being in the Avatar State.”

“And why would you want to give me that kind of power?” Roku asked.

“All I’d ask in return is that you agree to help keep our island safe for as long as you are alive. You know as well as I do, it cannot fall into the wrong hands.”

Roku nodded thoughtfully as if the idea appealed to him, as if he didn’t want to shake Ulo’s hand off his shoulder. In truth, he found the proposal terrifying. He was still struggling to wrap his mind around the responsibility that came with simply *being* the Avatar. And there must be some cosmic

reason one could only enter the Avatar State when necessary. Having access to that kind of strength all the time invited deep imbalance.

There was no shortcut to becoming a fully realized Avatar—as Sister Disha had reminded Roku nearly every time he’d pleaded with her to begin his airbending training. Only someone who possessed the patience and discipline necessary for dedicating years of their life to gain true understanding of the elements would be able to wield them wisely. Those who sought shortcuts to power were the ones least worthy of it. She had been right about how he needed to stop seeing himself first as a Fire National, so she was probably right about this too.

Anyway, Roku saw clearly through the half-truths of the proposition thanks to Malaya. Most likely, Ulo planned to grant *himself* that kind of power and believed the way to do it was by offering the Avatar to Yungib. He just needed to convince the Avatar to walk willingly into the slaughter.

Ulo glanced at the mound in the center of the Sacred Cave, and Roku followed his gaze. The light was nearing the top. Yungib would arrive within moments. The clan’s chief turned to Roku for his answer.

Roku took a deep, centering breath. Then he nodded.

Ulo returned the nod with a satisfied smile at the corner of his lips, as if he knew Roku would accept. “You are making the right decision, Avatar Roku. But remember, once we reach the top of the hill, be still. Center yourself. Make no attempt to bend any element. Once the cave spirit is with us, it will be like standing at the edge of a waterfall, and I wouldn’t want you to tumble over.”

With that, Ulo blew out the candle in his lantern, set it down, and climbed out of the tunnel and down into the vast chamber. Roku extinguished his flame and followed, heart hammering.

THE MACHINE

When they crested the hill that overlooked the sun-drenched valley, Malaya's heart dropped and Gyatso's arms tightened around her waist. Her clan's village had been destroyed.

The terraced hillsides were scarred with wide strips of bare earth, the unharvested plants uprooted and ruined. Some of the huts had been reduced to rubble and wreckage, crushed beneath colossal boulders, while other structures had been split apart by massive spears of stone that had sprouted from the ground. Amidst the chaos, survivors caked with dirt wailed or wandered in a daze. There was no sign of the Earthbenders, but dust still hung in the air, so they could not have been far.

Kilat whisked them down the rest of the way. Without waiting for Gyatso, Malaya hopped off the gorilla-tarsier and rushed to help. Heart in her throat and hands trembling, she tried not to think of how much of her clan remained, how they might ever rebuild. Nothing stood unscathed. But when Malaya reached the destruction, she froze. She didn't know where to start, what to do.

"I'm sorry," said a woman's familiar voice next to Malaya—it was Yuming, Qixia behind her. "The guards—they were so angry after we'd been captured, so angry about the others your people had killed. All they cared about was retaliation. When you and that Air Nomad broke us free, they rushed straight here to destroy your village, and now they're off to find your chief. Qixia and I tried to stop them, but—"

Malaya reached for Amihan's dagger.

Gyatso took her wrist. "Gather those who can help."

Malaya clenched her jaw. Moved her hand away from the weapon. Moved herself away from Yuming without a word. Everything became a blur as she hurried from one person to the next, checking each for injuries and sending those well enough to assist over to Baku, who seemed to have taken charge of the situation in Ulo's absence.

As if he'd done this a thousand times before, Gyatso moved calmly through the village, directing one person to help carry an unconscious man to safety, another to fetch clean water, another to help clear the rubble — before himself moving to the healer's side to tend to a small girl bleeding from her head.

But Malaya's initial burst of purpose faded, replaced by rage. She turned away and started back toward Kilat.

Noticing, Gyatso came over to her. "Where are you going?"

"To find the Earthbenders," she said without stopping. "They have to pay for what they've done."

"You can't just kill them," he said.

"Watch me." Malaya climbed onto Kilat's back.

"Please—they're cogs in a machine. It's the machine we have to figure out how to destroy."

"And if we let the Earthbenders go, and they end up killing your friend too?"

"Roku can take care of himself. The same isn't true of those who need our help here."

Malaya breathed hard as she tried to decide what to do. Catch up to the Earthbenders or stay and help her clan?

She finally let herself look at Gyatso's pleading face. Then she climbed off Kilat.



They cleared debris and lifted stones and tossed aside splintered bamboo and shattered wood. They pulled a young girl from the ruins. She was so still, they took her for dead, but she turned out only to be frozen from shock. They cleared Baku's hut and found his wife's lifeless body. They found one of the gatherers alive but with a sharp piece of stone piercing deep into his side. They lifted a collapsed wall to discover the weaver unconscious, but Gyatso breathed life into her lungs.

Malaya's lungs burned, her muscles screamed, her fingers bled—but she worked through the pain. She was so focused on the rescue efforts, she didn't notice the new outsiders until everyone began to look up.

There were three of them, riding a pair of forest green eel-hounds. The two riding together were young women—one hulking with short hair and

scars that ran along her forearms, the other lithe and with skin as dark as Malaya's. The third outsider, who was riding the eel-hound alone, was a short, stocky teenage boy with long black hair tied up in a small bun and a penetrating, assessing gaze that reminded Malaya of Ulo.

Kilat bared her teeth and tensed her muscles. Malaya drew her dagger. Gyatso picked up his staff. The long-limbed, serpentine creatures upon which the outsiders rode shifted restlessly in place.

The boy with the blazing eyes seemed unconcerned with either the destruction that stretched out before them or the aggressive welcome. His gaze fell on Gyatso. "Airbender," he said with an imperious tone, "Where is the Avatar?"

EXHALE

Ulo and Roku proceeded silently toward the light. Their footsteps echoed throughout the expansive space as they stepped across the hardpacked dirt on their way to the hill at the center of the Sacred Cave. Water dripped from somewhere within the shadows. The dark shapes of hundreds of sleeping bats dotted the stones overhead.

While he agreed with Ulo's assessment that the island's power couldn't fall into the wrong hands, he believed the clan's chief had already proved his hands were also not the right ones. Though he may believe murdering a few outsiders from time to time was necessary to protect their community, how many lives did that add up to over the centuries? The justification of murder was a slippery slope. He had come across something in an Air Nomad meditation scroll at the Southern Air Temple about how once someone devalued a single life, they devalued all life. At the time, he hadn't agreed. But he was starting to see how death invited death.

Which is why his current plan was to do as Ulo instructed and wait for Yungib. But when the cave spirit finally arrived, Roku wasn't going to passively wait to be sacrificed. He would try to speak to it before Ulo and convince it to leave this place forever. Ulo said that none of the clan's chiefs had ever been able to speak to Yungib, but Roku was almost certain that was another lie meant to prevent Roku from trying to connect with it. After all, the Avatar was the bridge between worlds.

They soon came to the hill and climbed into the light. Once they reached the very top, Ulo sat down in Lotus position and then gestured for Roku to do the same across from him. He did, and they both closed their eyes. Roku took a deep breath and let out a long, slow exhale. As his breathing fell into a steady rhythm, he focused on the abundance of spiritual energy already flowing through his chi pathways and waited for the sun to move a fraction higher in the sky—hoping that would happen before Ulo tried to kill him.

THAT OH-SO-SMOOTH MELON

“Who are you?” Malaya asked the three outsiders, instinctively placing herself between them and her clan’s damaged village.

“That doesn’t concern you,” said the burly young woman with the burn-scarred forearms. The smaller woman riding in front of her had some kind of coiled rope at her belt, but the one who’d just spoken carried no weapons, and neither did the boy. They must be benders.

“Easy, Kozaru,” the other young woman said, rolling her eyes.

“We haven’t come to harm you,” the boy said. He scanned the destruction. “Looks like someone already tried that. Earthbenders, perhaps?”

Malaya adjusted the grip on her knife.

The boy’s eyes slid back to her. “We’re merely looking for our friend Avatar Roku. Kindly point us in his direction, and we’ll be on our way.”

Gyatso stepped forward. “You’re Sozin,” he said with an uncharacteristic frostiness.

“*Prince* Sozin to you,” said the woman named Kozaru.

“Is that really necessary?” the other woman asked.

Kozaru scoffed. “Respect for our future leader? Of course. Not that you’d know anything about that, Dalisay.”

“There’s a difference between respectful and being sycophantic,” the woman named Dalisay said.

“What did you just call me?”

The boy—who was apparently the Prince of the Fire Nation—sighed. “You’ll have to forgive my companions. We’ve been traveling for a long time and could use a break from one another. But, yes, I’m Prince Sozin.” He took in the sight of Malaya. “I’m guessing you’re one of the natives.”

Malaya glared at Sozin, sensing that Gyatso was right about the arrogant boy’s true designs on the island.

Sozin tilted his chin toward Gyatso next. “Judging by your staff, your robes, and that oh-so-smooth melon, you’re one of the Avatar’s new little

friends from the Southern Air Temple.”

The Air Nomad nodded. “Gyatso.”

Sozin glanced around. “So where is he?”

Malaya and Gyatso kept their silence.

Kozaru barked, “Answer Prince Sozin when he asks you a question!” and then punched the air, pushing forth a blast of warning fire aimed at their feet, which Gyatso extinguished with an easy twirl of his staff.

Sozin looked up toward the sun, shielding his eyes with his hand. “To be honest, I fear our mutual friend might be in trouble. If you tell me where I can find him, we might even be able to catch up to those Earthbenders who did this. And after everything is settled, I promise that Kozaru and Dalisay will help you clean up here.”

Malaya looked to Gyatso. He gave his head a slight shake. But this wasn’t about taking Sozin up on his offer for revenge. She needed to get these three away from her clan. She urged Gyatso with her eyes to trust her, then turned to Sozin. “I’ll take you.”

“We’ll take you,” Gyatso corrected.

“Much appreciated.” Sozin glanced at the sky again. “Let’s not waste any time.”

Malaya and Gyatso left Baku and the others to continue their rescue efforts, then climbed back onto Kilat. They started down the path toward the caves, Sozin and his companions trailing on their eel-hounds.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Gyatso asked.

“Of course not,” Malaya said.

HIDE FROM THE WORLD, AND HOPE FOR THE BEST

Roku and Ulo continued meditating as they faced each other atop the Sacred Cave's central hill. The equinox sun shone through the crevice overhead, bathing them in its warm glow, and stillness settled over the space. Roku's breathing remained deep and steady. His heartbeat slowed. His muscles relaxed, and he prepared to enter the Spirit World.

He wasn't entirely sure what to expect from Yungib. From what he'd read, spirits came in a multitude of forms—rabbits, monkeys, fish, phoenix-eels, dragons, huge panda bears or owls or wolves, talking radish lotuses or fungi or rocks, giant insects, looming monstrosities. Some appeared human. Some were rumored to shape-shift. Some appeared one way in the Spirit World then another in the human world. Even he—as the Avatar—was a sort of spirit.

Basically, spirits were as diverse as life itself, and then some. And besides a range of appearances, spirits—like people—varied in how they regarded humanity. Roku hoped the cave spirit was one of the kinder types, or at least one of the more benign. He would even be content with one of the not-completely-murderous kinds.

As he continued to wait and nothing continued to happen, Roku began to wonder if “Yungib” was another lie. Perhaps the cave spirit was simply the central fiction around which Ulo's other stories revolved. Maybe it would be wiser for Roku to shift his full attention to the old man.

Should it come down to a fight, Ulo's decades of training would give him the advantage of control. But Roku likely out-matched the old man when it came to raw power. Ulo had said that the Avatar was a special kind of vessel, and he must have been telling the truth about that much if he planned to sacrifice Roku. Yet Roku couldn't forget the potential disaster that might result from calling upon that power.

And then Roku felt it.

At the edge of his awareness, a roaring energy was gathering in the distance like a tsunami. His stomach clenched in fear as the sensation took him back to his last night with Yasu, waiting under a light rain for the waves to crash into them through the darkness.

Roku forced himself back to the present.

His sense of the approaching spirit sharpened with each breath until everything else dropped from his awareness, including Ulo. It was the turmoil of constant motion. It was swirling and churning, pushing and pulling, pulsing and vibrating—all at once.

It was terrifying.

Why did he ever think his plan would work? Why did he ever think he could be the Avatar the world needed before he'd even learned to bend a second element?

He was not ready for this.

The urge to flee overcame him. The urge to leave this place, find Gyatso, and return to the Southern Air Temple and pretend like the island didn't exist.

But no.

Roku wouldn't shut his eyes, hide from the world, and hope for the best.

He was the Avatar.

He had accepted Sozin's request. He had insisted on continuing when Gyatso wanted to leave. He had found his way to the clan and Sacred Cave and Ulo. Now, he had to see things through to ensure that nobody—not even Ulo—exploited the cave spirit's power.

Yungib, he called out in his mind, hoping it was near enough to hear, *I am Avatar Roku*.

The massive chaotic presence that approached the Sacred Cave gave no indication that it registered Roku's call.

I am Avatar Roku, he repeated in his mind, imagining the words louder and more commanding. *I am the bridge between the human realm and Spirit World*.

Still nothing.

He tried again.

The residual spirit energy that you leave in this cavern is a danger to the human world. It is imperative that you cease such activities to maintain balance and peace.

Roku sighed.

Imperative?

Cease?

Why had he thought those words? He didn't speak like that normally. He was trying to impress a spirit who wasn't even listening.

Anyway, Roku thought toward Yungib, dropping the act as his "spirit" voice fell back into its natural register, *I really am the Avatar, and I need you to leave this place so that Ulo stops using your energy to kill people. And so nobody else does, either.*

A moment later, energy surged through him like a shock-wave, a thousand times stronger than the last time he'd stepped into the Sacred Cave. Roku's senses sharpened. He perceived his own aura pulsing sapphire. Across from him, Ulo's smoldered a deep amber. He felt the air currents swirling around them and sensed the heat of the magma coursing through the core of the island.

That dizzying feeling returned—that he could do anything with his firebending that he imagined. But now it was enhanced and extended. If he so willed it, he could blaze instead of burn, incinerate instead of warm, combust instead of spark. He could open his mouth and breathe dragon fire or extend his hand and cast lightning.

Yungib had arrived.

But before Roku could call out to the cave spirit again, Ulo's aura spiked—he was about to attack.

Roku channeled his inner Airbender and prepared to evade.

THE DIRT EATERS

“They’re up ahead in the fire bamboo grove,” Malaya whispered over her shoulder to Gyatso, whose hands were wrapped tightly around her waist as Kilat swept them along the path. Though the Earthbenders had had a head start, the gorilla-tarsier and eel-hounds proved fast enough to catch up.

“*Fire* bamboo grove?” Gyatso squinted. “I don’t know what that is, but I don’t see any bamboo.”

“It’s up ahead,” Malaya said. “Around the next curve.”

“Then how do you know the Earthbenders are there?”

“You can’t hear them?”

“You can?”

Malaya knew her ears were much more sensitive than others’ due to her training, but she assumed the sound of the Earthbenders was obvious to everyone. They had been moving clumsily through the jungle, stomping across the ground, rustling undergrowth, stepping on fallen branches, pushing stones aside to smooth their way. “And the tunnel entrance isn’t far past the grove,” she added.

Sure enough, as they turned the corner, the three Earthbender guards came into view about thirty paces ahead. They had been forced into a single file by the narrow footpath that cut through the dense forest of red bamboo. The pale red stalks stretched out as far as one could see on either side. They swayed and creaked in the wind as their narrow blood-red leaves rustled high overhead, blocking out the sun.

Kilat approached the grove so silently that the Earthbenders didn’t notice anyone behind them at first. It was only when the eel-hounds trotted up with their huffing and stomping that the guards spun around.

“Stop!” the nearest guard shouted, fists clenched at his hips in Horse stance. He was a tall, balding man with a square jaw.

“Or we’ll bury you like your friends,” the third guard threatened from the back of the line, an athletically built young man with a mustache and long brown hair tied up in a messy bun.

Malaya's fury flared at the sight of those who had attacked her clan, at the bragging threat. Gyatso was holding on to her to stay on Kilat, but it felt as if he were holding her back, reminding her of the promise she'd made not to seek vengeance. If not for him, she might have already flung her dagger at the balding man's hollow heart.

"Ah," Sozin said, ignoring the command, "the dirt eaters."

Since the path was far too narrow for any of the animals, Malaya, Gyatso, and the others dismounted. The eel-hounds slinked away, probably to find a way around, and Malaya commanded Kilat to do the same.

The middle guard—the tallest of the three by a full head—glared at Sozin with bright green eyes. "We're only looking for your chief," she said, mistaking the prince for a member of the clan. "Turn back and we won't hurt you."

Kozaru grinned next to Dalisay, as if thrilled to meet her possible match. "I'd like to see you try."

Gyatso stepped out in front, staff in one hand while his other gestured for calm. "There's no need to fight—we can figure this out peacefully."

"I don't think they're interested in that," Malaya said, drawing the dagger she'd taken from Amihan.

They outnumbered the Earthbenders five to three, but the setting reduced the advantage. The ground between the pale red bamboo was clear except for dead leaves and culm sheaths, but the stalks grew too close together to move through. So the only way forward was essentially a narrow corridor, the group of Earthbenders waiting a dozen paces away.

"I can take the lead," Sozin said.

But before he could, Malaya entered the grove. Gyatso edged his way in front of Sozin so he was behind Malaya. Kozaru and Dalisay followed behind the prince.

"Have it your way," the balding Earthbender said, then flung one fist upward, raising a chunk of earth from the ground. He ducked, and the tall woman with the green eyes thrust her hands forward, propelling the mass ahead.

Malaya slid underneath, and Gyatso swung his staff. Wind struck the rock, breaking it apart as fallen leaves rattled against the bamboo.

"A little boost please!" Malaya called as she charged toward the Earthbenders, who were already uprooting more chunks of earth.

“I’ve got you,” Gyatso said.

Malaya leapt, and a gust of air carried her forward. She flipped over the Earthbenders and landed behind the last guard, the young man with the mustache. Before he could turn around, she sliced the back of his leg. He screamed, then went abruptly silent and still—telling Malaya that the paralyzing basilisk-centipede poison with which she’d coated her blade had done its job. Tucking the Earthbender’s wide-eyed, frozen body out of the way and into the bamboo, she flung her dagger at the tallest guard.

Metal clanged against rock as it struck a shield made of condensed earth and clattered to the ground. The shield then flew forward, crashing into Malaya and knocking her down as it broke apart. She sprung back to her feet, dazed and dusty.

The tall guard raised another chunk of earth that split into a dozen discs that shot forward. Malaya slipped into the bamboo and they sailed past. She stepped back onto the path, kicked the Earthbender square in the chest, and snatched her poison-edged dagger from the ground as the guard stumbled backward into her balding companion, who was busy defending himself again Sozin and the others.

She moved to strike the guard before the woman regained her balance, but something sharp stabbed Malaya in the shoulder, making her drop her dagger.

“Sorry,” Dalisay called from the other side as she yanked her rope dart back.

Malaya ignored the stinging sensation in her shoulder and picked up the dagger again. She stood back up and spun around—and the Earthbender’s fist struck her in the gut. As Malaya doubled over, the wind knocked out of her, the woman cracked Malaya in the face with a knee, sending her falling backward. Pain radiated from her bleeding nose as she rolled onto all fours, gasping for air, head ringing, vision blurring. The Earthbender stalked toward her to finish the job as Malaya scrabbled to find the dagger.

Before she could, there was a blast of heat and brightness, an anguished cry, the smell of singed wood and flesh. The Earthbender turned around and ducked as a length of flame lashed over their heads. They both shielded themselves with their arms as the fiery whip slashed through a wide swath of bamboo, sending severed stalks clattering across the path. Another pass of the searing lash sent a second wave of bamboo crashing down.

When everything settled, Malaya finally found her weapon, picked it up, and stood with considerable effort. With the Earthbender's back now facing her, Malaya lunged forward and slashed at the woman.

A deafening *woosh* rocked the grove as a sudden burst of air swayed the bamboo, stirred the dead leaves, and pushed every-one—including Malaya—off balance. Malaya's dagger even blew out of her hand and sailed away into the sky, disappearing like a kite whose string had slid through loose fingers.

Malaya sighed and inwardly cursed Gyatso.

Her eyes fell upon cut bamboo poles lying nearby in the path that the fire whip must have sliced. She quickly sized them up, picked up two arm-length segments, then clacked them together and twirled them around to test their weight and balance. They weren't poisoned daggers, but they'd do.

Even though Gyatso's airbending must have been in service of sparing someone's life, the conflict resumed as soon as everyone was back on their feet. Billowing flames and rumbling earth again sounded from the other side over Gyatso's calls for peace and periodically neutralizing gusts of wind. The Earthbender Malaya had been brawling with before rushed forward, fists now sheathed in stone. Malaya dropped into a fighting stance and raised her sticks.

Bamboo and stone clacked together rhythmically as Malaya blocked the Earthbender's flurry of punches and kicks and the Earthbender blocked Malaya's slashing, whirling strikes. Every few seconds, the Earthbender landed a glancing hit or Malaya's stick struck an arm or rib or leg, but neither had the clear advantage. And as the melee stretched on, their breathing grew labored, their skin slicked with sweat, and their movements and reactions began to slow.

Malaya poured all her strength into one more swing, planning to spin away afterward and put some space between them to catch her breath. But when the Earthbender lifted her stony fist and blocked it, faint cracks webbed across the rock.

Both their eyes went to the fractured stone.

Instead of backing away, Malaya pressed the attack, forcing the Earthbender to stay on the defensive. The unrelenting strikes chipped away at the rock hit by hit until the gauntlet crumbled away. Malaya did not stop. The guard tried to absorb most of the hits with the fist still encased in

hardened earth, but she couldn't keep up with the constant barrage of both sticks swinging at her from every angle. Soon, her second earthen glove crumbled away.

"Stop, please! Stop!" the woman cried, as she tried to shield herself with her bloody and bruised forearms.

Malaya kept striking. The woman fell and curled into a ball, covering her head with her arms as hits rained down on her. Malaya thought of the dead and the injured they pulled from the rubble as her sticks clacked and cracked repeatedly against flesh and bone. When Ulo had ordered Amihan to end the Earthbenders before, Malaya tried to help them because she believed they had not done anything to deserve death. Now they had.

"Malaya!" called Gyatso. "Stop! She's done!"

When Malaya didn't stop, Gyatso pushed her back with a gentle blast of air, then stepped between her and the battered Earthbender guard. Furious at the interruption, Malaya started to try to push past him. But the way he looked at her—as if she were a monster—stopped her in her tracks. She lowered her arms, let the sticks fall from her hands, and looked around as if waking from a nightmare.

Gyatso turned away, set down his staff, and knelt to help the woman. The guard with the mustache she'd managed to paralyze with the dagger was still alive, tucked into the bamboo where she'd left him. At the other end of the path, the balding guard was unconscious in Kozaru's meaty grip, and Sozin stood staring wide-eyed at Malaya, impressed. There was no sign of Dalisay.

Sozin sidled past everyone until he reached Malaya. "You're half Kozaru's size," he said, "but twice as fierce. I could put those talents to good use if you're interested in making some gold."

Malaya said nothing and peered around the Fire Nation's prince to Gyatso, who was already tearing strips of fabric from his robes to clean and bandage the tall guard.

Sozin shrugged. "Think about it. But now that we've dealt with the dirt eaters, let's get on with finding Roku. How much farther is this cave?"

"Just past the grove," she answered vacantly.

"Then let's keep going." Sozin slid past her. Kozaru followed, bumping into Malaya as she passed.

“I’m . . . I’m sorry,” Malaya said when it was just her and Gyatso and the woman she’d beaten beyond what was necessary. “I couldn’t stop myself.”

Gyatso didn’t respond and didn’t turn around. When he finished wiping away the blood, he gave the guard some water and helped her sit up against the edge of the bamboo. His movements were filled with gentleness and softness and compassion—in stark contrast to Malaya’s own actions from a few moments ago. “It’s going to hurt for a while, but you’ll be all right,” he said to the Earthbender.

Malaya imagined the words were for her.

Then Gyatso picked up his staff, stood, and followed after Sozin and the others without saying anything to Malaya.

Malaya apologized to the woman and then caught up to the Air Nomad. “I don’t know what came over me . . .”

The red leaves rustled overhead. Their feet padded along the path. After a few moments, Gyatso sped up, leaving Malaya behind. And she did not try to match his pace.

Because maybe she was no better than Ulo or Amihan. Maybe she was broken. Maybe it was impossible to turn out any other way when she was raised how she had been raised and lived the life she had lived. Or maybe she was making excuses.

She and Gyatso had been getting on better than she ever had with anyone before. She had even been trying to work up the courage to ask if she might leave with him and Roku after all this was over. But that was out of the question now. He would probably never look at her in the same way ever again. She had revealed that something feral and brutal lived within her, something that was antithetical to everything that the Air Nomad stood for, everything that she had come to admire about him.

Maybe that’s who she truly was.

Malaya’s head snapped to the left as she heard someone moving in the bamboo forest. A few moments later, Sozin’s companion Dalisay came into sight, snaking her way through the stalks in the distance. As she neared, Malaya noticed the woman held the dagger Gyatso’s wind had blown away during the fight. Malaya tensed.

But when Dalisay reached Malaya, she held out the tear-drop-shaped blade, offering the hilt. “I felt bad for accidentally hitting you with my rope

dart back there, so I went and found your dagger.”

“It’s not mine,” Malaya said, but didn’t reach for it.

“It’s exquisitely crafted,” Dalisay said, eyeing the black-red metal.

“What kind of steel is this?”

“It’s made from local elements,” Malaya said, then turned away to go after Gyatso. “You can keep it.”

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NOT ENOUGH

Roku barely rolled out of the way in time to avoid a spear of ice that sprouted from the ground beneath where he'd been sitting a breath ago. The attack had forced Roku to move down the hill, giving Ulo the high ground. The clan's chief glared at Roku with his cold blue eyes and face contorted with a rage that had always been lurking behind the façade of calm.

"What are you doing?" he shouted. "You're ruining the ritual!"

"You mean your plan to sacrifice me to the cave spirit?" Roku said.

Ulo raised his hands, not bothering to disagree. "I guess we'll have to do this the hard way."

The clan's chief gathered moisture from thin air and heaved an icy spear at the Avatar's chest. Roku ducked, and it struck the ground behind him at the base of the hill, shattering into thousands of skittering shards.

"You don't need to this," Roku said backing down the hill to put some distance between them.

"I do," Ulo said. "Yungib and the Lambak clan have protected each other for generations. We belong to each other. Once I kill you and complete the ritual, I won't need this cave. I'll be able to wield Yungib's full power wherever I go."

"I thought you only wanted to defend your people."

"As the world changes, we must adapt," Ulo said. "Perhaps that means that to defend, I must learn to attack." With that, Ulo began to launch a barrage of ice spikes at Roku from atop the hill.

Roku dodged and danced between them as he moved around the base of the hill, drawing on his martial arts training at the Southern Air Temple. Ulo shifted his strategy and lashed at Roku with tentacles of water, but Roku evaded so efficiently that not a drop touched him. Ulo tried crushing Roku between two towering walls of ice, but Roku soared out of reach. And when Ulo flash froze the air around Roku, the Avatar turned the ice into vapor and freed himself with as little effort as blinking. Perhaps it had something to do with the way Yungib's energy impacted him, but Roku felt like he could

keep this up all day. He could run faster, jump higher, and move more swiftly than he'd ever been able to before. At times, he felt like he was flying.

If Roku kept this up long enough, the sunlight would shift away from the hill and Yungib would leave—assuming Ulo was telling the truth about that much at least. But that would only solve the problem until the next equinox.

Speaking to Yungib was the only way to ensure the spirit never returned. He had failed when he tried before, but that was probably because it was too early. He had to draw Ulo off the hill, incapacitate the clan's chief, then slip into the light before it disappeared and reach out to Yungib again.

And to do so, it was not enough to move like an Air Nomad—Roku would also have to attack like a Firebender.

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BEYOND REPAIR

Gyatso still hadn't said anything to Malaya by the time they caught up to Kozaru and Sozin at the entrance to the tunnels. Dalisay was not far behind, still admiring her new dagger, while the eel-hounds and gorilla-tarsier were nowhere to be found. The sun was still directly overhead but starting to inch downward.

"So, this is your—what do you call it—secret tunnel?" Sozin smirked, gazing into the yawning darkness. Malaya could tell he was only pretending to be skeptical. She could sense behind his arrogance both the genuine concern for his friend and his interest in the island's power. Only, she didn't know which was greater.

"It's the entrance to the tunnels that lead to the Sacred Cave," Malaya corrected. "That's where they probably are."

"I suppose it's like a maze down there?"

Malaya nodded.

"Then you'll have to show me the way."

Malaya hesitated. If Gyatso was right that Roku's friend's true motivation was the island's rumored power—a possibility Roku himself had reluctantly acknowledged—then leading Sozin to the Sacred Cave was the very last thing she should do.

At the same time, what choice did she have? She and Gyatso couldn't take on all three Fire Nationals, even if she weren't afraid of what she might do if she'd held her dagger again. And even though Gyatso trusted Roku to handle Ulo, Gyatso didn't know Ulo like she did, no matter how much she'd already shared. Roku would need help.

"Okay," Malaya said. "Let's go."

Sozin's smirk grew wider, his golden eyes hungrier.

Everyone started toward the steps carved into the side of the earthen pit that led down to the arched entrance in the rocks, but Sozin held out a hand to halt Kozaru, Dalisay, and Gyatso. "Just the girl and me," he said.

Kozaru shrugged and sat down on a nearby rock. Dalisay rolled her eyes, muttered something about a library, and stormed off. Gyatso shook his head. "If she goes, I go," he said.

Hope sparked to life within Malaya. Maybe her violent lapse of control hadn't completely ruined whatever was growing between them.

"How sweet," Sozin said. "But no."

Gyatso didn't move. "Why not?"

"I don't need you. And, to be honest, I don't trust you."

"You don't trust me? I'm an Air Nomad."

"Exactly," Sozin said. "As my father always says, never trust anyone who won't eat meat."

"That's really a thing he says?" Kozaru asked.

"It is," Sozin said.

"Wise words from a wise Fire Lord," Kozaru said, nodding sagely as she pulled a handful of Komodo-rhino jerky from her satchel.

Though shorter, skinnier, and younger than Sozin, Gyatso stepped up to the Prince of the Fire Nation. "If there's anyone who shouldn't be trusted, it's you."

Sozin's grin slid into something sinister as he locked eyes with Gyatso. "Is that so?"

"I don't understand how Roku could ever be friends with someone like you."

"With a head that small, I'm sure there's no shortage of things in this world you don't understand."

Gyatso's knuckles whitened as he tightened his grip on his staff.

"Want to try something, little Airbender? You don't even have your arrows yet." Sozin reached up and flicked Gyatso in the center of his forehead.

Malaya pulled Gyatso back before he could react. "It's okay," she said, urging the Air Nomad to back down.

"Saved by your girlfriend," Sozin said.

Gyatso exhaled, then peeled his eyes away from Sozin and turned to Malaya. "Are you sure?" he asked, tone softening.

"I'll be fine," she said. Then added, "Trust me like you trusted Roku."

Gyatso nodded, then embraced Malaya. Her heart filled—it was the first time anyone had ever held her like that.

“Be careful,” he whispered into her ear.

“I will,” she said. And then, “Gyatso?”

“Yes?”

She pulled back and looked him in the eye. “Do you think some people are born broken?”

“No,” he said, without hesitation. “There are things in this world that can break us, but I’ve learned there’s always a way to heal.”

Malaya blinked back tears. “Maybe after all of this is over, I can go back to the Southern Air Temple with you?”

Gyatso smiled. “I’d like that.”

A muffled boom shook the ground, making everyone stumble. All eyes went in the direction of the distant volcano, a slice of which was visible on the horizon through the trees. But it looked undisturbed.

“If that wasn’t an eruption, then what was it?” Dalisay asked.

“Roku,” Sozin said to himself, face etched with worry. Then his features hardened as he turned to Malaya. “Let’s go.”

Another blast rocked through the earth as Malaya turned toward Gyatso to say one final goodbye—but Sozin seized her by the wrist and pulled her away. He tugged her down the steps and to the tunnel’s entrance, releasing her once they stepped inside so she could lead the way.

Maybe she wasn’t beyond repair, but Sozin was exactly like Ulo. He wouldn’t let Gyatso or her live, and he certainly wasn’t going to go back and help her people. He wouldn’t want to leave any witnesses who might spread word of his unauthorized activities. People like him never changed and should never lead—be it a clan or a nation. She was going to make this tunnel his tomb or die trying.

A SPIRIT OF ALL NATIONS

“Stop Firebending!” Ulo shouted from atop the hill. “You’re going to destroy the cave!”

And maybe he was right. When Roku had tried to throw a simple jab of flame, a canon blast of white fire erupted from his fist for several seconds, overshooting Ulo and scorching a hole through the wall that rocked the entire cavern. When Ulo sent more ice spears his way, Roku had put up a wall of flames to defend himself that rose all the way to the ceiling and punched new gashes in the earth overhead. And when Roku tried to bend his flames into daggers, they crackled in his hands like bolts of lightning that seared his palms so painfully, he had to let them dissipate.

Roku’s wild attacks eventually pushed Ulo into a retreat that left the top of the hill vacant, and Roku launched himself upward on blazing jets to take the high ground—but the flames below his feet surged and coalesced into a whirling column of fire. Stretching all the way to the ground, it enveloped the lower half of his body and propelled him faster and higher than he’d intended. A blazing sphere encircled him as he smashed into the stone ceiling, sending rubble tumbling down.

The sphere and column flickered away as quickly as they had appeared, and Roku plummeted face-first toward the ground. He closed his eyes and shielded his face to brace for impact. But as he did so, Ta Min’s revision of Sister Disha’s belief unexpectedly came to mind: To be the Avatar meant to be a spirit of *all* nations.

Relying on the avoidance tactics of Airbenders alone had not worked. Falling back on the overwhelming offense of firebending did not work. It was not about trying to be one or the other, switching between modes or styles like playing Pai Sho using one strategy for one game and then switching to another strategy for the next match.

He had to use fire and air together. He had to embody both elements simultaneously.

Which meant he needed not only to act like an Airbender, but to *actually* airbend.

Roku exhaled and opened his eyes. As his robes flapped like tattered wings, he moved his arms in a spiraling motion he'd seen Gyatso perform and focused on bending the air rushing against his body, manipulating it to help himself fly like a sky bison or glide like an Air Nomad. He only hoped that Yungib's overflowing energy would make up for his complete lack of training.

He did not take flight, but he felt himself slowing. And as he neared the ground, a whirling cushion of air gently set him on his feet.

He smiled.

He had finally done it.

He had used airbending for the first time.

But was it the first time? He'd wondered how he'd survived the fall the night he'd crashed into the tunnels—maybe this was the answer. Maybe he'd unconsciously accessed his airbending to save himself. And then he thought of his movements that had been helping him avoid Ulo's attacks. Airbenders used their air-bending to help them move faster or jump higher, so maybe he'd been airbending all along. And maybe it was because of his lack of airbending strength that it hadn't overwhelmed him in the same way his firebending had.

"That fall should have ended you," Ulo said, having regained his position in the glow of light that illuminated the top of the hill. But there was a slight slant to the shaft of sunlight now. He had to stop Ulo and speak to Yungib.

Roku brushed himself off and shrugged, at the mound's base once more. "I'm the Avatar."

Ulo dropped into a wide stance and swung his arms around. Water began rushing through every opening in the ceiling, every crack in the cavern walls. It streamed down like hundreds of sudden waterfalls, as if Ulo meant to fill the cavern like a basin by draining every stream and river and lake on the island, every drop of moisture from the air and clouds and forest above.

Roku considered raising the temperature of the air to evaporate the water before Ulo could use any of it, but he didn't want to turn Ulo—or himself—to ash. Still, he had to do something. Given the attacks Ulo had

been able to launch so far using minimal moisture, Roku wasn't eager to fight the clan's chief when surrounded by his element.

Roku adjusted his stance, feet sloshing through the shallow water that already covered the cavern's floor. He took the deepest breath he'd ever taken in his life, filled his lungs, held, focused—and exhaled with all his energy.

A gale gusted from his lips, carving a dusty path up the hill as it struck Ulo and sent him careening into the shadows at the farthest reach of the cavern. The clan chief's body slammed into the far wall, then fell to the wet ground with a splash. He did not get up. And when the pouring water he'd been drawing into the space rapidly slowed to a trickling mist, the distant shape of his body lying in the shallow water remained still.

Roku tried to will the area where Ulo had fallen to freeze to buy himself some time—but found he couldn't access his water-bending yet, even with the help of Yungib's energy.

Counting on Ulo to stay unconscious for at least a few minutes, Roku rose on a whirling column of fire again, this time using his airbending to slow his ascent and control his movement. He tugged on a draft of air that carried him forward and dropped onto the patch of light atop the hill. Roku quickly sat down, closed his eyes, and pressed his fists together. He shut out everything—even the fear that Ulo was certain to strike at any moment.

He focused.

Emptied.

Released.

Reached.

Like an unagi diving to the deepest depths of the sea, Roku cast his being beyond this world, propelled by Yungib's energy.

And when he opened his eyes, he did not find himself sitting in a cavern. Nor did he find himself in some glowing form standing before a menacing spirit. He no longer perceived a physical “self” at all.

He was a drifting consciousness, awash in pure spirit energy. The energy roiled and churned, chaotic and violent. It was as if two great waves were crashing into each other in an unrelenting collision, both refusing to give way, to accommodate, to blend even in the slightest. At the same time, whatever was happening here didn't feel like a battle or a fight. Roku sensed no animosity stirring the turmoil, no intention to conquer or subdue.

There was turmoil—but there was also balance. The confluence of energies was as raw and pure as a tidal wave or typhoon or earthquake or wildfire. As destructive as any of those events could be to humanity, none of them were inherently bad. They were natural processes meant to relieve pressure and restore balance.

And Roku understood.

What the Lambak clan called “Yungib” was not one spirit—it was two. They were crashing into each other in a space in the Spirit World that corresponded to the island’s Sacred Cave in the human world. Roku couldn’t even begin to discern what they were or why they met. But the equinox must play some vital role, drawing both spirits here at the same time and generating a supernatural phenomenon so intense, it resonated across the veil.

On the one hand, this clarity brought Roku a deep sense of relief. His understanding cut through Ulo’s mistruths and deliberate fictions and allowed him to grasp the contours of the situation. On the other, it would be useless trying to persuade “Yungib” to leave this place so humans would not exploit its power. He may as well play Pai Sho against the tide.

Meaning, Roku had no clue what to do next.

HER FINAL ACT

Sozin followed Malaya so closely as she jogged through the tunnels toward the Sacred Cave that she felt the heat of his flame prickling at her back.

“Hurry up,” he commanded. Despite his arrogant tone, his concern for his friend was obvious. The deeper they had run into the winding tunnel system, the more frequent and more intense the rumbling explosions thundering through the earth had become. Did his front ever fool anyone?

“I’m going as fast I can,” Malaya said between panting breaths. Her lungs burned, every muscle ached, and her feet felt as if they were still encased in stone. It was only midday, and her morning had consisted of breaking the Earthbenders free, dueling Amihan, digging through the destroyed village to help as many of her people as she could, fighting the Earthbenders responsible for that destruction, and now this. Hopefully, killing the Prince of the Fire Nation would be her final act of the day.

Though she had never stepped foot inside the Sacred Cave, she knew the way by heart; her innate sense of direction was so good, she was often tasked as a child with delivering provisions or messages to the benders working or training within. So she led Sozin through the ancient lava tubes confidently, never hesitating to select the correct path when the tunnels forked or split levels. The only other thing beyond her exhaustion that slowed their progress were the occasional instances when they had to climb over or around rubble that had fallen in the way due to the intermittent quakes that shook the earth. None of it had made the way impassable so far, and she hoped that would be the case all the way through. She needed to make it to Roku and help him in whatever way she could — she just planned to end Sozin first.

Her current plan was to wait until they reached the next semi-collapsed section of the tunnel, slip through first, find a heavy stone, and bash him in the head as he stepped through. When all this was over, she’d say he was crushed by falling rocks. If nobody believed her and she had to face the consequences of killing the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation, so be it.

It was not her best plan, but she was low on options. She had dropped her bow and arrows long ago, she had given her dagger to Dalisay, and she was exhausted to the point of nearly passing out. There was no way she could engage a skilled Firebender in direct hand-to-hand combat and win.

Even if she succeeded, Malaya wouldn't lie to Gyatso. And after he learned that she'd taken Sozin's life, she'd likely lose his friendship forever. She would have to live with that too. As much as the world needed people as soft and kind as him, it also needed the hardened to keep the cruel in check so that the gentle could remain gentle. If either of them—and the other members of her clan—were to survive this day, she had to end this threat. And given the type of leader she suspected Sozin was on track to become, she might also be doing future generations a favor. Gyatso was right that Roku had too much history with Sozin to see this clearly, but she was certain the Avatar had reached a similar conclusion about Ulo.

She and Sozin continued running through the tunnels, the sounds of their heavy breathing and rapid footsteps filling the space between the distant explosions that rumbled through the underground.

"I can feel it," Sozin said as they moved through the final fork. "We're almost there, aren't we?"

"Yes," Malaya said, disgusted with the way his excitement seemed to overshadow his worry now that they neared the Sacred Cave. "Almost to the end."

A few moments later, their way was blocked by a wall of rubble. It was exactly what Malaya was waiting for. As they approached it, her mouth went dry. Her heart managed to beat even faster than it already was. A hollow feeling settled into her gut. She reminded herself that humans were another type of animal and that killing someone like Sozin was even more justified than taking the lives of all those innocent creatures she'd hunted or trapped over the years to fill her belly.

Sozin brushed past her and punched a burst of fire that blasted a small opening through the fallen rock along the wall.

Malaya moved to go through first, but Sozin gripped her upper arm, his face lit by the glow of the flame he held in his palm. "Me first."

Her mind cast about for a logical reason to disagree, but she came up with nothing. She stepped back and shifted her plan. She would let him

through and attack him from behind when his attention inevitably turned toward the cavern.

Sozin let Malaya go and squeezed himself through the narrow opening, taking the light so Malaya was left behind in near total darkness.

“Let’s go,” Sozin urged from the other side.

Malaya scanned the ground and swiped a sharp rock fragment roughly the size and shape of a paring knife. It would have to do. She took a deep breath, steeled herself, and slipped through.

Sozin was waiting on the other side in an angled attack stance.

“Thanks for your help,” he said, then whipped his body around in a spinning fire kick that cracked Malaya hard across the face as it singed her cheek.

Malaya stumbled backward, shook it off, and sprung forward with the shard of rock in hand. She felt the rock pierce his stomach a moment before he knocked her arm aside and cracked his head against hers.

Pain jolted through Malaya’s skull. Her vision doubled and she lost her balance. A fist struck her in the gut, knocking the wind from her lungs and sending her falling back against the tunnel wall. She tried and failed to get back to her feet—she was too sluggish and dizzy, and her head was still ringing like the world was splitting apart.

A moment later she was consumed by fire.

At least, she thought—in that final moment before excruciating pain overcame her—she had tried.

THAT NEAR-MISS WITH DESTINY

Sozin turned away as the fire burned out. He didn't want to see the body. Kozaru had assured him he would feel less and less with each life he took, but it was still only his second—and the first he'd taken intentionally. At least nobody was there to witness his shaking hands or pale face. Even so, he did his best to calm himself and continue on his way.

He hadn't wanted to kill the girl—he liked strong, talented women, and the offer to join his royal guard had been sincere. So it was nothing against her. He'd had no choice but to strike first and do what had to be done to reach his friend.

Unfortunately, the moment he met Malaya, he had seen in her eyes that she would eventually try to kill him. That was always the problem with vicious women who thought too much. Useful tools until they weren't. It was only a matter of time until Dalisay's mind also took her over the edge. As much as Sozin had come to enjoy her company, he was prepared to do what would be necessary if he couldn't keep her in line.

Bringing his focus back to the present, Sozin checked the stab wound on his stomach she'd managed to inflict before he'd knocked her hand aside. It was deeper than he'd thought, but no matter. He dropped his tunic, shook out his hands, then raced toward the Sacred Cave.

He had to help Roku. His friend was skilled enough, but he was not a true fighter and had always lacked the ferocity and resolve necessary to deliver the killing blow. He'd never even fought a single Agni Kai—Yasu had always stepped in on his behalf, and Sozin had taken on that responsibility after Yasu's death.

No, Roku wasn't cut out to be the Avatar. Not like Yasu, who had been born minutes before Roku. Not like Sozin, who had been born minutes before Yasu. Perhaps, he thought—not for the first time—this had all been some cosmic miscalculation.

No matter. Sozin had gotten over that near-miss with destiny the night he'd spent in the Spirit Library. Even if the sands buried that place before

he returned, he'd already acquired enough knowledge to gain the kind of power he needed to help his father secure the Fire Nation's future for generations. Maybe even the kind of power that could rival the Avatar's.

The deeper Sozin descended, the more he noticed everything had gone still. No more muffled explosions sounded in the distance. No more quakes shook the ground. No more flashes lit the darkness ahead. Even the sound of rushing water had quieted.

Was he too late? Had he missed the fight? Had the clan's chief already ended Roku?

Sozin doused his light and sped up. He saw a dim glow in the distance and sensed the shifting air as the passageway widened. The farther he ran, the brighter the light grew and the wider the tunnel yawned until it finally opened up into a vast cavern that was as big as the Royal Palace.

The Sacred Cave.

Sozin paused at the mouth of the tunnel to survey the situation. Roku sat in a patch of sunlight on a small hill surrounded by shallow water in the center of the chamber. His fists were pressed together, his eyes were closed. Still as a statue, it looked as if he were deep in meditation. And as far as Sozin could tell, he was alone.

Was the fight over—had Roku *actually* won?

Sozin cupped his hands around his mouth and called out, "Roku!"

But Roku didn't move a muscle.

Sozin climbed out of the tunnel to shake his friend awake—and stumbled as he was instantly overcome with the singular most euphoric feeling he'd ever experienced in his life: raw power.

He straightened up and flexed his fingers. Energy coursed through his chi pathways like blazing fires within a furnace. He only needed to open the furnace door to channel the energy into any of the legendary firebending powers he'd lusted after his entire life—no need to waste years with arduous training, no need to prioritize. Protected by indomitable strength like this, the Fire Nation could be truly safe, truly free. If only it could last.

A sound in the distance pulled him back into the present. Someone was at the other end of the cavern, sloshing through the water toward Roku.

So the fight wasn't over.

"Roku!" Sozin shouted as he started to approach. "Some-one's coming!"

Roku's eyes remained closed, a thousand miles away.

Before Sozin could call out again, an old man wearing an old-fashioned loincloth trudged out of the shadows on the opposite side of the hill. His long white hair and beard contrasted with his dark brown skin, and his rage-filled eyes seemed to glow blue in the dimness as he moved forward, encircled by a flowing ring of water. The next moment, the ring splintered into several long segments that solidified into ice and shot toward the oblivious Avatar.

Sozin slid his front foot forward and shifted forms to fire-bend a barrier of flames that would melt the ice spears that were on their way to impale his friend.

But the moment Sozin released the energy, he knew something had gone horribly wrong.

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FADING WARMTH

A rumbling explosion broke Roku's concentration, and he snapped back into the Human World just in time to see a blinding burst of blue flames burn out near the entrance to the cavern. The blast's shockwave arrived an instant later, and Roku bowed his head and guided the scorching air around himself so that the worst of it slid past harmlessly.

As soon as it did, he lifted his gaze again. In the distance was an immense, charred impact crater—with someone lying unconscious at its center.

Gyatso?

Roku flew forward on a jet of fire, airbending to keep from careening out of control. He crossed the distance in seconds, landed wildly nearby, then rushed to the body.

"Sozin?" he said, shocked.

Sozin's eyes were closed, and his body was still. Fear chilled Roku as he felt his friend's rapidly fading warmth.

Sozin must have stepped into the cavern and used his fire-bending without fully realizing that he'd be unable to control the flow of energy. But why was he here? And why would he use his firebending upon seeing Roku? Unless . . .

Roku spun around. The white-bearded chief had returned to the hill and was swaying as he stretched his arms out, pulled them in, and pushed them forward again. A towering wave surged out of the shadows, cresting at half the height of a Fire Temple as it quickly crossed the cavern.

Roku shielded Sozin with his body and used his airbending to encircle them both in a swirling sphere of wind as the wave crashed down on them. Water rushed past for what seemed like forever, but Roku held Sozin and held the barrier. After the world settled, he stood and turned toward Ulo, jaws and fists clenched, spirit burning with a righteous rage.

Forget his promise to Gyatso—Roku would not lose both his brothers.

Roku shifted into an offensive stance, thrust a striking palm forward—but withheld the fire’s release. Instead, he let his fire-bending energy build, no longer trying to hold himself back. A slip of blue fire sprouted from the base of his palm and stayed in place, expanding as he charged it with his anger. The surrounding air shimmered and shivered as the quavering flame grew.

He released it.

A spiraling blast of iridescent flames erupted from Roku’s open palm, incinerated the hill, and filled the entire chamber. The world shook as heat and fire saturated the space and pushed outward. The mounting pressure was too much to contain; the Sacred Cave shook, then gave way. The ceiling burst apart—and collapsed.

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TWO WICKS

Roku opened his eyes to find himself in a dense white fog. He couldn't see anything, but his feet stood upon solid, flat stone. The drafty air that flowed around him tasted crisp and cool. His body felt as light as the wind.

Gradually, the mist dissolved, and the gate to the Southern Air Temple's sanctuary took shape before him. The enormous arched wooden doorway was shut tight, the spiral piping embedded in its center keeping it locked to anyone who couldn't bend air.

Except Roku was now an Airbender.

He took a deep breath, focused his energy, and took a long step forward with his right foot as he thrust both hands forward in half-clenched fists. Currents pushed forth, slipping into the openings on each side of the door's locking mechanism. The wind hissed as it wound its way through the carved tubes. The three shell-like structures embedded in a triangular pattern flipped as the air pushed past, each letting out a different low, reverberating tone. When all three began to harmonize, a piece in the middle rotated, and the heavy doors opened inward.

Roku entered.

The statues of his past lives waited inside. Their stony likenesses filled the shadowed space, spiraling around the main level and then ringing the inside of the tower as high as Roku could see. He made his way over to the spot where his own would someday stand—to find it was no longer empty.

Roku's statue now stood next to Avatar Kyoshi. His hands were clasped behind his back. His oval-shaped face was set in a severe expression, and his somber gaze stared straight ahead, level with the living Roku's eyes. And atop both their heads perched the dual-flamed headdress of the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation.

Until this point, Roku had proceeded through the sanctuary with the unquestioning logic of a dream. But standing face-to-face with *his* statue, the logic began to crack, and panic arrived as everything came rushing back. The last time he'd been here, he'd argued with Sister Disha before

flying off on Lola that night with Gyatso. Then there was the island. The Earthbenders. Ulo. The Sacred Cave. Yungib. Sozin. The collapsing ceiling.

What had happened?

Was this a dream or a vision or a death—or something in between?

Roku fell to his knees. It didn't matter.

He thought he'd been making progress. He had come to accept that Sister Disha had been right about how he would not be ready until he let go of his identity as a Fire National. He had started to understand what Ta Min meant when she had encouraged him to embrace every nation, every part of himself. He had even come to agree with Gyatso about how ending Ulo was not the way forward. But in a moment of rage, driven by the blinding desire to save the person who'd saved him so many times, he'd forgotten all that he'd learned. He'd acted without thinking and tried to depend on the raw strength of his Avatarhood to solve his problems.

He had certainly killed Ulo with that overwhelming stream of iridescent flames, Sozin had likely been crushed under the rubble, and his own life was probably draining away as he lingered in this non-space, his spirit taking its last breath before slipping off to be reborn among the Air Nomads.

When Roku had almost died that day on the mountain path walking with Ta Min, it was because that Earthbender had buried him. This time, he had buried himself.

At best, if Gyatso's faith that the Avatar was always exactly who the world needed at any given moment was true, then Roku supposed the world must have only needed a Fire Avatar for a moment before passing to Air. Maybe there was some greater wisdom in this. Even though Gyatso was still struggling to overcome his own pain, Roku trusted that the young Air Nomad would grow into exactly the kind of person this world truly needed. If he was a testament to how the Air Nomads shaped souls, surely the future would be better held by such compassionate hands.

At worst, Roku was a mistake that had been swiftly corrected before too much damage could be done. Humans were far from perfect—why should whatever force that guided the Avatar's spirit be any different?

Roku was so lost in his head, in his hopelessness, that he did not notice the statue next to his begin to glow with a soft light as she stepped forward. It was only when he felt its warmth that he looked up.

He took in the long, layered Earth Kingdom robes. The martial gauntlets. The war fans tucked into the waist sash. The blood-red lips and chalk-white face paint. The firm, stoney gaze set below red and black streaks of makeup and the golden, fan-shaped headdress.

It was Kyoshi.

“Rise,” she said, the single word deep and solemn and resonant as it filled the sacred sanctuary. Everything an Avatar’s voice should be.

Roku did as she commanded. Though he was tall, she was taller, and he had to look up to meet her eyes. He had made countless unguided attempts to commune with his preceding incarnation since the Fire Sages had identified him as the Avatar. Now that he was finally facing her, he had no idea what to say.

“Where am I?” Roku finally asked.

“You fear you failed,” she said, ignoring his question and cutting to the heart of the matter. “You fear you were never truly meant to be the Avatar.”

Roku said nothing. For what can one say when their deepest fears have been laid bare?

“But you did not fail, Avatar Roku,” Kyoshi said.

Roku looked down. “I think I killed someone.”

“You did what you had to do to save others. It will not be the last time you must strike down the lost for the sake of the greater good.”

Though Roku had once agreed with such an assessment, he couldn’t shake the regret that burned through him. He had stepped into that cavern fully intending to stop Ulo but not end him. But when the crucial moment arrived, he had reverted to his old ways of thinking, done the moral calculus, and arrived at the answer that Sozin’s life was more important than Ulo’s.

“You had no other choice,” Kyoshi reassured him, as if she were in his head. They were, in a way, of one mind. “The old man would not have stopped attacking.”

Roku shook his head. “He didn’t need to die.”

“What is the alternative?”

“I don’t know. Prison, I guess.”

“Would it have been a more humane ending for him to slowly waste away in a cage while expending countless resources to ensure he never escaped to do more harm?”

“I don’t know,” he said again. “But there has to be a better way.”

Avatar Kyoshi said nothing.

“We can’t kill our way to peace.”

Kyoshi kept her silence.

Roku dropped his head. He wanted to keep arguing with his predecessor, to assert that every single life was inherently valuable. He wanted to argue that nobody was ever too lost or too far gone, that perhaps it was only such condemnations that doomed someone beyond the reach of empathy.

But how could he? In the final reckoning, his time as Avatar had lasted a few brief months, while hers had spanned more than two centuries. He had mastered only his native element, while she had become a fully realized Avatar. He had failed in his first true test, while she had fought countless battles on behalf of the most oppressed to forge a lasting peace. His life had been a single wave, breaking early and pushing gently ashore. Hers had been a season of tsunamis that reshaped continents.

She was an Avatar.

He was a placeholder. A pause. A flame that flickered, then went out.

“The only true mistake we make,” Kyoshi finally said, “is not looking within.”

Roku raised his eyes to ask Avatar Kyoshi what she meant, but her spirit was gone, reverted to carved stone. But next to it was a vacant space—his own statue had vanished.

Maybe his flame hadn’t gone out quite yet. He did not know what death felt like, but maybe it was not this—unless he let it be, unless he gave up. Maybe there was still a chance if he only chose to take it.



Roku blinked and opened his eyes in darkness. He was no longer standing but stretched out, pressed between impossibly heavy rocks and chunks of hard-packed dirt. His entire body was numb, the side of his face encrusted with blood. He tried to move but couldn’t budge the rubble pinning him down. He tried to call out to Sozin and Ulo, but his throat and mouth were so dry, they stuck. He reached for Yungib’s energy but came up as empty as a bucket drawn from an empty well.

Instead, Roku thought of Kyoshi. He remembered that although she had appeared to him as a separate entity, that was an illusion. They were one—two wicks lit from the same flame.

He looked within.

Then he moved the earth.

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COME BACK FOR THE BODY

Gyatso sat on a boulder and stared up at the fragments of sky visible through the leaves, trying to center himself. Every fiber of his being still wanted to dash into the tunnel to help Malaya and Roku. But Kozaru and Dalisay wouldn't be far behind, and he couldn't take on both of them alone. He had no choice but to simply trust that his friends could take care of themselves while he waited for the right moment to present itself.

Sozin's two companions were outside the entrance to the tunnel, arguing about what they should do, paying him no mind. Kozaru was standing still with her arms crossed, but Dalisay paced frantically back and forth. After the ground had shaken an alarming number of times, everything had gone completely still. They had taken it as a good sign at first, but Sozin had yet to return. The longer the stillness held, the tighter their anxiety wound.

"We should go help," Kozaru suggested once again.

"The rumbling stopped, so the fight must be over," Dalisay said. "I'm sure he's fine."

"If he's not?"

"Then he's not."

"So who's going to pay us for all the time we've spent babysitting him for the last several months?" Kozaru asked.

"You can't collect your payment if you walk in there and never come out."

"Sozin said if something ever happened to me, he'd send it to my family."

Dalisay scoffed. "You believed that?"

Kozaru uncrossed her arms and began to idly smooth a palm over one her burn-scarred forearms. But she didn't say anything.

"Let's wait another hour," Dalisay suggested. "If there's no sign of him, we head back to the cove, board the boat, and sail home."

"And strand him here?"

"He'd do the same to us."

Kozaru didn't bother arguing with that point. "But what if he's fine, realizes we left, and makes his way back to the Fire Nation? The Fire Lord would imprison us for the rest of our lives for abandoning the Crown Prince."

"Sozin wouldn't tell anyone what happened—remember that he wants to keep this all secret, especially from the Fire Lord. He'd be angry, sure, but he's more likely to buy our silence than to confess to his father about whatever he's been up to at the Spirit Library and this weird little island. Not to mention dragging the Avatar into all of it."

Kozaru was quiet for a long time, as if considering this possibility. "If he really wanted our silence, I don't think he'd reward us with a bonus," she finally said. "I think he'd cut our throats."

"You really believe he'd do something like that?"

"I was raised by thieves and bandits and mercenaries," Kozaru said. "When it comes down to it, there are few people who are willing to do *absolutely* anything to get their way." She paused and crossed her arms again. "Sozin is one of them."

"Maybe that'll make him a great Fire Lord someday."

"Or the worst kind."

"Hmm. Guess we'll see."

"Assuming he's still alive."

The conversation faltered. Kozaru yawned. Dalisay continued to pace back and forth.

Gyatso let his attention drift back to the sky. After a few moments, he noticed a low-flying, fast-moving fluffy cloud shaped like a sky bison careening across the blue. It suddenly changed direction and veered out of sight. A few moments later it reappeared, passing directly overhead.

Gyatso's face broke into a wide grin. It *was* a sky bison. And not just any sky bison—it was Lola.

If he had been waiting for the right moment, this was it.

Gyatso hopped off the boulder and sprinted away. "Great getting to know you!" he said over his shoulder.

"Hey, where you going, kid?" Kozaru called. And then to Dalisay, "Should we go after him?"

Gyatso didn't slow down to find out. He snapped his glider open as he continued to run, raised it above his head, and pulled a gust of air beneath

its wings that lifted him into the sky. He weaved through the trees and burst through the canopy and into the open air. No longer concealed by fog, the valley and mountains stretching out below. He scanned the sky for Lola. Instead, his eyes landed on Sister Disha, who was flying toward him on Amra.

“Gyatso!” she called out, face lighting up with relief at the sight of the young Air Nomad.

He waved and sailed over to meet them. As he passed over the sky bison, he dropped down onto her saddle and flicked his glider closed. “Lola?” he asked.

The Air Nun nodded. “When she showed up at the temple without either of you, we knew something was wrong. Then we followed her here as quickly as we could.”

“I love sky bison,” he said, reaching over the saddle to pat Amra on the back.

“Who doesn’t?” Sister Disha said. “And your airbending seems to be working again.”

“Long story.”

“But where’s Roku?”

“Somewhere down there,” Gyatso said. The Air Nun peered over the side of Amra as if expecting to see the Avatar. “Underground,” he clarified.

“Does he need our help?” she asked.

Before Gyatso could answer, a muffled boom thundered from underground, shaking the earth and sending flocks of birds scattering into the sky. “He might,” Gyatso said, eyes wandering toward a wide swath of the mountainside covered in dead trees and vegetation. It was as if all the life had been sucked out of them.

Amra circled back and began to descend, but she had not gone far before a second explosion detonated underground and the area Gyatso had been looking at burst open, erupting with a wave of iridescent fire.

The blast wind blew past Gyatso and Sister Disha, ruffling their robes and Amra’s fur as they held on tight to the saddle. Amra righted herself as it passed, and the Air Nomads looked down to find a massive cloud of dust beneath them. Amra flew them close enough that Sister Disha and Gyatso were able to sweep a layer of dust aside to reveal an expansive collapsed pit of rubble.

“Roku was down *there*?” Sister Disha asked, horrified.

Gyatso’s heart sank. “And Malaya,” he said even though the Air Nun didn’t know who that was yet.

Before she could ask, he dove over the side of Amra, sailed down on his glider, and landed swiftly at the center of the destruction. Using the same technique he’d used to save Roku and Ta Min on the mountain path, he began swinging his staff from side to side, generating arcs of wind that swept away chunks of fallen earth one shallow layer at a time. He kept working in this way, knowing it would not be enough—even when he felt Sister Disha land nearby and join his efforts—but he also knew he could not give up on his friends.

They had not been at it long before the earth began to tremble. This was not the sudden blast of an explosion but a slow, steady building. The shuddering became more violent, and the Airbenders exchanged a fearful look, anticipating a secondary collapse. They leapt away to the edge of the pit just as the debris rose—then hung frozen in midair—exposing the floor of the pit two or three hundred feet below.

It was the Sacred Cave. Rather, it had been.

And then, through the hovering field of broken earth, Gyatso spotted Roku. The Avatar stood with his feet planted wide and arms outstretched overhead. His eyes were shut and his jaw was clenched as he strained to hold the weight of all he was somehow bending. Someone lay unconscious at Roku’s feet, and another form lay in a heap at the far end of the pit.

With one last burst of energy, Roku hefted the earth aside to clear the pit—then collapsed. Sister Disha, Gyatso, and Amra wasted no time flying down to him.

Roku had lost consciousness, but he was still breathing. Nearby, Sozin stirred and groaned, his body badly burned and battered. “What’s Prince Sozin doing here?” Sister Disha asked with shock.

“Where’s Malaya?” Gyatso asked.

But Sozin was too far out of it to answer.

Gyatso turned and sped toward the other person. But as he neared, he saw it wasn’t Malaya.

It was a white-bearded old man who must have been Ulo. His unblinking, icy blue eyes stared upward, and the center of his torso was its own pit scorched black.

Gyatso looked around but saw no other bodies. Sozin had reached the Sacred Cave—so where was Malaya? If she was not here, did that mean she had escaped from Sozin and survived? Or was she buried somewhere else nearby?

“Who’s that?” Sister Disha called over.

“The clan’s chief,” Gyatso said, still frantically scanning the pit for any sign of Malaya, heart in his throat. “He’s dead.”

Sister Disha sighed. “We’ll come back for the body. Help me get Avatar Roku and Prince Sozin onto Amra so we can get them back to the village as quickly as possible. I just hope they have a good healer.”

“I have to find my friend,” Gyatso said as a familiar hollowness settled into the pit of his stomach. He should never have let her go alone with Sozin.

“Gyatso,” Sister Disha said sternly but gently, “there’s nobody else here. These two need a healer if they’re going to survive. Help me.”

Gyatso cast one more look about the area. Sister Disha was right. There was no one else here. Dejected, he returned to the Air Nun. They hefted the Avatar and the prince onto the sky bison’s saddle, then flew Amra out of the pit and toward the village.

“You and Roku have a lot to explain,” Sister Disha said, her tone shifting from concerned to reprimanding now that she’d found both her charges alive.

But Gyatso barely heard her. His breathing had become shallow and jagged, and his eyes welled with tears as his attention lingered on the sun-drenched pit receding into the distance, still searching for the girl with the sharp knife, telling himself that above all else, she was a survivor.

LET GO

Roku's eyes opened slowly. The world took a moment to come into focus, and when it finally did, Gyatso's bald head was the first thing he saw. He was sitting next to Roku either asleep or meditating. Roku was apparently lying on his back in a small bamboo hut with a thatched roof that had been shoddily assembled. Thin lines of sunlight spilled through the spaces between the wall's slats, and the smell of woodsmoke and stewed meat hung in the air. He almost thought it was Ulo's hut, but there were no animal skulls or weapons hanging from the walls.

"I'll take some of that stew, please," Roku said, his voice rough from lack of use.

Gyatso looked up, smiling wide. Yet his eyes were bloodshot, and he looked like he hadn't slept in days. There was also a deep sadness emanating from his aura. "Roku," was all he said in greeting before shouting over his shoulder, "He's awake!"

"And dying of thirst!" Roku called out weakly to whoever Gyatso was speaking to. "Anything but moon-blooming sampaguita tea, please," he added.

The young Air Nomad chuckled. "How are you feeling?"

"Great." Roku looked down at his body. There were plenty of cuts and bruises, but he was in much better shape than he expected. The overflowing energy that had coursed through him in the cave was definitely gone. "Oh," he said as he tried to sit up, "I used earthbending."

Gyatso helped him. "I saw. You looked very Avatar-like."

Roku seemed pleased. "And airbending," he added.

"That I did not see. Are you sure?"

"Kind of. It was in the Sacred Cave, so I'm not sure that counts."

"It probably counts," Gyatso said. "Did you waterbend, too? Am I already speaking to a fully realized Avatar?"

"Not quite yet." Roku shifted and pain shot through his shoulder. "Some extra training would probably do me some good."

“Same.” Then, more seriously, “But I haven’t had any more problems with my airbending since I started talking about Yama.”

Roku nodded, proud of his friend. “You found me in the Sacred Cave?”

“It’s more of a Sacred Pit now, but yes.”

Roku remembered that. “How long have I been out?”

“Three days.”

Roku did not remember that. “Oh.”

“We rushed you here as quickly as we could. The clan’s healer has been treating you. Thank the spirits she survived the attack.”

“What attack?” Roku asked.

“The Earthbender guards destroyed the village before Malaya and I caught up,” Gyatso explained. “But we managed to stop them before they reached the entrance to the tunnels. The clan is holding them for now, along with Oh Wen and the two other Earthbenders. One of them confessed that the queen had denied the Western Kingdom Trading Company permission to travel to this island since it belongs to the Fire Nation, but they came anyway. We’re thinking it would be best to send them back to Queen Guo Xun to face justice in Omashu . . . but Baku—this blacksmith with a really neat braided beard who’s kind of become the new chief, I guess—he’s not too into that idea.”

Roku nodded, then asked the question he already knew the answer to. “Ulo?”

“He didn’t make it,” Gyatso said simply. He offered no justification about how Roku had done what was necessary. Which Roku appreciated—he didn’t want to be let off the hook.

“I tried not to kill him,” Roku said after a moment. “The more I thought about it, the more I realized you were right.”

This was true in the island’s case, but Roku was starting to think it held more generally as well. He’d have to find a way to help people understand the essential truth that nobody would be safe until everyone was safe. That was the real task that lay before him as Avatar.

Roku waited for Gyatso to ask how he’d strayed so far from his intention not to kill Ulo, but Gyatso remained quiet. Again, the silence felt intentional and nonjudgmental, and Roku was grateful. It made him feel like his own intentions mattered, even if he had taken someone’s life. He’d tell the whole story in time.

“And Sozin?” Roku asked.

“In worse shape than you,” Gyatso said, “but alive—also thanks to the clan’s healer.”

Roku exhaled. The air he’d slung to cover his friend’s body had been enough to save him from being crushed to death. “So he’s here?”

“Yes, but not for long. The healer thinks he needs to rest a few more days, but his companions are determined to take him back to the Fire Nation in the morning. Fire Lord Taiso’s orders, apparently.”

Another tense quiet fell between them as Roku waited for the Air Nomad to reiterate his scathing critique of the Prince of the Fire Nation. Instead, he held a resigned silence. There was nothing more he could say to persuade Roku of his friend’s true intentions, his true nature. They both knew that by this point. Roku either believed him or did not.

Even though he didn’t want to—Roku now believed Gyatso. At least to an extent. And that hurt more than Roku could articulate.

Maybe they both understood this, and that’s why nothing needed to be said.

Roku cleared his throat. “Anyway, is Malaya around? I’d like to thank her for helping me, you know, not be sacrificed to a cave spirit.”

Gyatso lowered his head. Took a deep breath. Swallowed.

And before he even spoke, Roku realized it was a fresh grief he had perceived in Gyatso’s aura.

“They found her body yesterday,” Gyatso said, voice thick with emotion. “In a collapsed section of the tunnels.”

“Oh, Gyatso,” Roku said, his heart breaking for his friend who had only just begun to heal from losing his sister last year. Gyatso hadn’t known Malaya for long, but even from the brief meeting the three of them had had on the eve of the equinox, Roku could tell how close they’d already grown.

Roku sat up and turned so he was facing Gyatso. Then he leaned forward until their foreheads rested against each other. Gyatso began to sob, and Roku put his hands on the young Air Nomad’s shaking shoulders. They stayed that way for a long time.

Through the walls floated the sounds of the village. People moved about and chatted idly. Someone was playing the flute. Children laughed. Birds chirped. Pig-chickens oink-squawked. Though the village had been

destroyed, they had already begun to heal. Roku hoped Gyatso would too, again.

Gyatso's sobs slowed. He leaned back, rubbed his face with his palms, then offered a sad smile as if to say he'd be okay.

"May Malaya's flame light our way," Roku said.

"Thank you, friend," Gyatso said. "Last I saw her, she was going into the tunnels with Sozin to show him the way to the Sacred Cave."

Roku thought for a moment. "I didn't see her inside. Did Sozin say what happened to her?"

Gyatso looked away. "That it was an accident. Falling rubble."

Guilt settled into Roku's gut at the realization he'd taken two lives unintentionally that day.

Gyatso looked like he wanted to say more, but then he didn't.

Did he think Sozin was lying? No. That couldn't be. Gyatso had voiced his suspicions about Sozin before, so he'd have no qualms doing so again if he doubted Sozin's account. Maybe he just wasn't ready to talk about it.

The sound of someone climbing the bamboo ladder drew their attention to the hut's front entrance. Sister Disha appeared and ducked through the doorway, relief written on her face. "Thank the spirits," she mumbled. Maybe she was not as detached from everything in this world as she claimed to be.

She joined Gyatso at Roku's side and handed him a steaming bowl of soup. Starving, he thanked her, then drank the broth greedily. It tasted sour and savory, reminding him of one of his favorite tamarind-based dishes from back home. After draining the bowl of everything except for the meat, he sighed contentedly and set it aside. Then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and thanked her again. "How did you find us?" he asked now that he'd tended to his stomach.

"Lola," Gyatso answered, smirking. "You know, because we're so spiritually connected."

Roku rolled his eyes. Then he turned to Sister Disha. "I'm sorry. You were right—I wasn't ready."

The Air Nun didn't argue with him. "Gyatso has been kind enough to fill me in on everything since you two snuck away, but what happened down in that cave with the clan's chief? Sozin's conscious but his companions are . . . unwilling to let us speak to him very much."

Gyatso looked on with interest.

As best as he could, Roku tried to explain. About Ulo's "offer." About his plan to speak to Yungib first. About trying to avoid Ulo's attacks without harming the clan chief. About the cosmic collision of two ineffable spirits. About Sozin's sudden appearance. About his disastrous attempt to save his friend. And, finally, about connecting with Kyoshi, speaking to her, and tapping into her spirit to earthbend.

The Air Nomads listened to Roku's story without interruption or judgment, taking everything in. When he finished, they were quiet for a long time. Eventually, Sister Disha turned to Gyatso. "May I speak to the Avatar alone, please?"

Gyatso nodded, then said to Roku, "We still need to do something about all that," and blew out a small gust that mussed Roku's hair. "I'll see you soon, Avatar."

With Gyatso's departure, Roku was alone in the hut with the airbending master he had directly disobeyed. As a result, several people had died, the Lambak clan's entire way of life had changed course, and knowledge of the island's power would surely spread.

When they heard Gyatso reach the bottom of the ladder and walk away, Sister Disha unexpectedly said, "You and I were close friends in your previous life."

"We were?" asked Roku, stunned. She had never mentioned that she knew Avatar Kyoshi, and he had been so overeager to begin his airbending training—and so sour when she'd refused to start teaching him—that he had never really asked much about her life. To the Roku of only a few months ago, Sister Disha had sprung into existence to serve a specific purpose for him.

Sister Disha nodded. "She was as powerful an Avatar as everyone believes."

Roku sat up straighter. "Were you one of her companions?"

"For more than twenty years. In fact, I was her final airbending companion."

No wonder the Council of Elders had handpicked her to train Roku. "So you must have been there when she . . ." Roku trailed off.

Sister Disha shook her head. "We parted ways two years before she passed."

“Why?”

The Air Nun let out a long, heavy sigh. “You know how when you’re flying on a sky bison, the people below shrink smaller and smaller the higher you go until they become specks that gradually fade away?”

Roku nodded.

“Kyoshi had lived so long, become so powerful as Avatar, that I believed she had lost perspective on the inherent value of individual lives. Don’t get me wrong, you could study the entirety of human history and you might not find someone who did as much good as she did for the world. But in her relentless pursuit of justice and peace, she seemed to hesitate less and less when determining whether the threat someone posed outweighed their right to live.

“After one mission—our last together—it turned out a daoifei leader in the Earth Kingdom we’d been pursuing was the son of a man she’d executed many years prior. Every terrible thing he and his group of outlaws had done—and they had committed many of the worst atrocities you could imagine—had been for the sole purpose of drawing Avatar Kyoshi’s attention so he’d have the chance to face her himself.”

Sister Disha’s pause told Roku all he needed to know about the man’s fate.

“After she settled the matter, I pointed out how that man’s life had been shaped by her decision to kill his father. I asked her to consider how many of the fires we’d been running all over the world to put out might have been lit by her. I told her that I feared what she was becoming, what she might be if she lived another hundred years. Maybe I was wrong, but when I looked inward, that was what I felt to be true.”

Roku’s respect for Sister Disha deepened. He recalled how intimidating it had been to stand in front of Kyoshi’s fierce presence even when it was a shadow of who she must have been in life. He couldn’t even imagine saying such things to her face. “I’m guessing she didn’t like that.”

“To put it lightly,” Sister Disha said. “Therefore, I left. I shared my concerns with the Council. Word spread, and no other airbending master was willing to assist Avatar Kyoshi anymore.”

Roku nodded, unsure of what to say. He thought of Gyatso’s assurance that the Avatar was always exactly who the world needed at that moment. Could both that and Sister Disha’s stark assessment of Kyoshi be true?

The Air Nun cleared her throat. “Know that you do not need to be the same as Avatar Kyoshi to be a great Avatar. As the world changes, so too must the Avatar. And never forget what she told you when you connected with her: Everything is already within you. The real struggle is inward.”

“So you don’t think we need Kyoshi anymore?” he asked, still finding that hard to believe despite everything she’d told him.

“No—we need Roku.” She stood to leave. “You should rest now.”

“Can I ask you one more thing?”

She nodded.

“I know you said you weren’t with her in the end . . . but do you know how she died?” For despite the fact Kyoshi had been the longest known living Avatar—or human, for that matter—nobody seemed to know how death had finally managed to catch up to her.

“I don’t,” Sister Disha admitted. “But perhaps she realized that sometimes people see us more clearly than we see ourselves—and then let go.”

LEVERAGE

Roku didn't get a chance to talk to Sozin until early the next morning when Kozaru and Dal went ahead to prepare for their journey back to the capital. He found the Crown Prince sitting atop the roof of the hut he'd been recovering in, looking out over the village and the valley beyond. Roku used his air-bending to skip the climb but slipped on the thatched roof as he landed. Sozin caught him by the arm to stop him from falling, and they cracked matching smiles.

"I could use some more practice," Roku said as he drew his arm free and found his footing. He sat down next to his friend, resting his elbows on his knees as Sozin leaned back on his hands.

"This island is beautiful without all that fog," Sozin said. "Too bad it's so hard to reach."

The dawn sky was streaked with lavender and gold above the half-harvested terraced hillsides. Below them, villagers were already hard at work rebuilding and repairing, aided by the other Air Nomads Sister Disha had brought with her. Waterbenders were irrigating the rice. Firebenders were starting the cooking fires. Earthbenders moved the stones that the company's guards had used to destroy the village. Those rocks too heavy or too rooted to the earth to move had been accepted as permanent features of the landscape and integrated into the new designs.

Not counting what had happened in the cavern, the last time Roku and Sozin had been together was the morning Roku had flown away from the Royal Temple on Amra with Sister Disha to begin his training at the Southern Air Temple. It had been only a few months since then, but it felt like years had already passed.

"You want to know?" Sozin eventually said, apropos of nothing.

"About what?" Roku asked.

"About how much I knew when I asked you to come out here and deal with the Earth Kingdom."

“Sure,” Roku said, surprised—but grateful—Sozin had brought up the topic on his own. “How much did you know when you asked me to come out here and deal with the Earth Kingdom?”

“More than I let on,” Sozin confessed. “I had learned about a fog-covered island where benders could train to enhance the strength of their bending. I came here with Kozaru and Dal to check it out, and *we* found Earthbenders—not some random patrol. I knew that if I tried to get them to leave myself, it might have turned into something bigger.”

“With your father, or with the Earth Kingdom?”

Sozin smirked. “Both.”

Sozin’s honesty disarmed Roku. He had been expecting to have some serious confrontation with Sozin in which he’d have to back him into a corner to extract fact from fiction. But here his friend was, laying it all out in the open and sounding genuinely remorseful. He decided not to ask about the two Earthbender guards who had gone missing before Malaya had found their group.

“Was Ta Min aware of any of this?” Roku asked instead.

“No,” Sozin said as he shook his head adamantly. “She knew only what I told her to tell you.”

Roku hoped that was true.

“And you’re welcome, by the way.”

“For what?”

“For sending Ta Min to deliver the message. Figured that was only way you’d finally talk to her. Just don’t forget to invite me to the wedding.”

Roku laughed and shook his head.

“Anyway,” Sozin continued, “it wasn’t until later that I learned the bending enhancement was limited to the space of the cave and that there were bloodthirsty natives eager to murder all trespassers. As soon as I found out, I rushed over here as soon as I could.”

“Don’t call them that,” Roku said.

“Call who what?” Sozin asked, genuinely unaware of what he’d said.

Roku thought of Malaya. What she had done for him, for her clan, for the world. What she had sacrificed. He’d only had the chance to meet her once, but she’d had the courage to question her chief and try to do what she thought was right. There were not enough people in the world like that.

“They’re the Lambak clan,” he said somberly. “They only want to live in peace like the rest of us. They’re no more blood-thirsty than any other group of people.”

Sozin put his hands up, palms out. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“So how did you find out the truth?” Roku asked, letting him off the hook.

“You won’t believe it—but the Spirit Library.”

Roku’s eyes widened. He knew how badly Sozin had wanted to find it, despite Yasu’s insistence it was all made up. “Are you serious? It’s real?”

Sozin grinned. “I am. And it is.”

“You must have been in paradise. What else did you learn while you were there?”

“Not much. I had to leave pretty quickly after I realized I needed to go save you.”

“Lucky me,” Roku said.

“You don’t say.”

They fell quiet. Birdsong floated up from the trees. A sky bison skimmed past overhead bearing several enormous jars of water, trailed by a flock of firefly-starlings. A sliver of sunlight peeked over the eastern hills, cracking open the day and filling the valley with a soft golden glow.

“I’m sorry for lying,” Sozin said. “And for trying to take advantage of you.”

Roku nodded. It didn’t feel great that he had been wrong about his closest friend, but he appreciated the admission.

“I don’t suppose there’s anything I can do to make you forgive me?”

Roku thought for several moments. He had never considered forgiveness as a matter of transaction. One forgave by letting something go that might otherwise sever an established relationship. He wanted to repair his friendship with Sozin, but he had to think beyond himself. He was the Avatar now, and here was an opportunity he could leverage for others.

“Two things,” Roku said, holding up two fingers.

Sozin smiled, amused at the mercenary specificity of Roku’s response. “Yes?”

“First, I know Fire Lord Taiso’s been pushing to get all of the outer islands under complete Fire Nation control, but let the Lambak clan continue to live as they always have. Let them remain independent.”

This wasn't about keeping the island's power secret anymore, though. He had destroyed the Sacred Cave, and Sister Disha had confirmed there was no lingering excess spiritual energy. The cave spirits were gone, and since Ulo had never passed details of the equinox ritual onto anyone else, they'd never return.

"Live as they always have, eh?" Sozin pondered. "Even the killing outsiders thing?"

"Oh. No . . . not that part."

"Hmm. Even if I wanted to do this for you, Roku, how could I make it happen? I'm not the Fire Lord yet."

Roku shrugged. "Convince your father to declare this a vulnerable natural area to protect the wild hog-monkeys or the gorilla-tarsiers. Or something else. I don't know. But I know that you can do anything you put your mind to."

"True enough," Sozin said. "I'll find a way."

"Thank you."

"And the second thing you require for my penance, Avatar Roku?" Sozin asked with a sarcastically formal tone and a seated mock bow.

"If more people thought like the Air Nomads, we might be able to move toward real peace," Roku said, echoing what Gyatso had said. "What the world has now feels more like a long pause between wars, doesn't it? With no open conflicts between the Four Nations, so much progress has been made. But also, I wonder what kind of arsenals are being built behind closed doors." His eyes went toward the highest peak in the distance. "It's like we're standing at the base of a dormant volcano."

Sozin arched a brow. "What are you proposing, exactly?"

"Let the Airbenders open a temple in the capital. A place where they can teach others their philosophy. If it goes well, maybe they could open more temples in the other nations."

"Did your new little friend put you up to this?" Sozin said. And though Sozin was joking, Roku sensed a twinge of jealousy behind his words.

Roku shrugged. It wasn't exactly Gyatso's idea, but it was inspired by what the Air Nomad had told him Yama had always wanted to do.

"If I help make these two things happen, then we're good?"

Roku nodded. Then he narrowed his eyes. "At least until the next time you lie to me."

Sozin burst out in laughter and draped an arm over Roku's shoulders. Roku shoved him playfully away, making him wince in pain and clutch his stomach.

"You okay?" Roku said.

"Ah, I'm fine. Still recovering is all."

Roku nodded, wondering if Sozin had sustained a more serious injury than he was willing to admit.

"Anyway," Sozin said, his tone turning serious. "Yasu would be proud of you."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

As pleasant as it was to be with his friend again and to have come through the conflict with their relationship intact, there was no denying something between them had shifted. Roku was a different person now. Or, rather, he'd moved closer toward becoming his true self. Who knows what Sozin had gone through. They still fit together closely enough for now, but maybe there would come a day when they no longer did. Maybe that would be in a few years. Maybe a few decades. This notion had crossed his mind several times since he was identified as the Avatar, but Roku finally believed that he no longer needed Sozin in the same way he once did.

SOMETHING MEANINGFUL

The evening before the Avatar and the Air Nomads were scheduled to return to the Southern Air Temple, Gyatso sat cross-legged by himself on a large rock in the middle of the forest. His eyes were closed, and his upturned hands rested on his knees. The dusk air was crisp and clear. There was a cool, gentle wind that carried the scent of soil and stone, leaves and wood, moss and wildflowers.

Though Abbot Rabten might have encouraged him to use the moment to meditate on the forest's natural cycle of life and death, he was thinking about Malaya. Not her death, but her life.

Her sharp mind and intimate knowledge of the land. Her courage. Her surprising sarcasm. Her even more surprising softness. The way they'd so quickly opened to each other. The feel of her knee against his at the edge of the hot springs. The feel of his hands on her waist as they rode Kilat. Their final embrace. And every other moment they had shared during those brief, holy days.

The feeling of something poking him in the leg drew Gyatso back to the present. Slowly, he opened his eyes to find Roku at the base of the rock reaching up and poking him with what looked like an Airbender's staff, except it was made of red bamboo.

"That was some deep meditation," Roku said, lowering the staff. "Abbot Rabten would be proud."

Gyatso gestured toward the staff. "New?"

"Like it?" Roku looked it up and down as he turned it over. "Sister Disha helped me craft it this afternoon. Still need to add the wings, though." He tried a twirl but dropped it. "And I still need some practice."

Gyatso picked it up and handed it back. "You'll get the hang of it. But I'm guessing you didn't come all the way out here to brag about your woodworking."

Roku's expression grew somber. "It's time."

Gyatso sighed, then nodded. He took a deep breath and smoothed his hand over his head as he looked around at the surrounding forest one last time. Then he picked up his own staff and climbed down off the rock, and they started down the path together.

As much as he tried not to, Gyatso couldn't help but think of Roku's fumbling attempt to say something meaningful when they left the fishing village on their last relief mission. He hoped this time the Avatar would search harder within himself to find the right words.

"Any advice?" Roku eventually asked, proving they'd just shared the same thought.

Gyatso already had an answer. "Say what you needed to hear after you lost Yasu."



The bodies each rested on their own pyre across a clearing at the top of the western hill that overlooked the terraced valley. They were wrapped in white, handwoven burial shrouds. Seven in all. Ulo's was on the far left, Malaya's on the far right. In between were the bodies of the villagers who'd been killed by the Earthbender guards. There had been no sign of Amihan since that day in the Greywood grove, but the clan had decided it best not to assume the worst.

Gathered around the dead stood Gyatso, Roku, Sister Disha, the handful of other Air Nomads who had come with the Air Nun, and the surviving members of the Lambak clan. The sun was setting, streaking the horizon with blazing swaths of amber and orange and violet.

From what Baku—the clan's new chief—had told the outsiders to expect, the solemn portion of the ritual was nearly complete. After the cremation, they'd return silently to the village and spend the rest of the night feasting, dancing, and telling stories of the departed. As much as he hurt, Gyatso was looking forward to that part, needing to share and learn as much about Malaya as he could.

Eventually, Baku nodded to Roku, and the Avatar stepped forward so he was between the living and the dead. He glanced at Gyatso, then faced the group and cleared his throat.

"There's nothing I can say in this moment to soothe your sorrow," he began. "But I don't believe I should try to do so. You have lost people whom you loved deeply and fiercely, and that hurts. It hurts. And it always

will.” Roku paused for a moment, glanced at Gyatso, then continued. “We must let ourselves feel that pain, greeting our grief like a blessing. Like the unexpected arrival of an old friend at our doorstep. Do not keep the door closed—invite them in. Have some tea and spend some time catching up. Then, when it’s time, let them be on their way.”

With that, Roku held up his palm and brought a small flame to life. He held it out to Baku, who came forward with a torch. Baku lit the torch from Roku’s flame, carried it over to Ulo’s pyre, then set it in the wood piled underneath. As the kindling caught, Kamao—Baku’s son—came forward with the next torch and did the same for his mother’s body. And so it went down the line until Malaya’s parents lit the final pyre.

Roku extinguished his own fire and looked over everyone, eyes brimming with tears.

“May their flames light our way,” he concluded with a nod.

He returned to Gyatso’s side, and each draped an arm over the other’s shoulders. “How was that?” Roku whispered.

“Not bad,” Gyatso said as he watched the fires grow.

EVER-SHIFTING CURRENTS

A few weeks later, Roku stood next to Sister Disha at the edge of the Southern Air Temple's stone training pit, watching a small fire burning at its center. It was surrounded by a forest of tall, narrow bundles of straw scattered densely throughout the area. Each time a fresh gust of mountain wind blew through the training grounds, it swept the flames sideways, threatening to ignite the nearest clump of straw — which would inevitably cause the others to catch in a domino effect.

Roku knew where this was going.

"This is an airbending exercise uniquely designed for Fire Avatars," Sister Disha said, the snow-dusted, cloud-skirted, pillar-like mountain peaks of the Patolas looming behind her. "The goal is to put out the fire."

"Seems easy enough," Roku said.

"Using only your airbending," she clarified.

"Hmm," Roku said. He should have seen that coming.

"First, you'll have to overcome your instinct to fight fire with firebending by either dispersing the flames or pushing them out of the way with your own," she went on. Those were foundational skills every Firebender learned in the first week of their first year at the Academy and then certainly used in any fight, but Roku had already proved he could bypass that impulse. "Second, you'll need to resist your Firebender's instinct to channel your energy in straight, direct lines. You've been trained to project your flames outward toward your target, driving your will forward until it reaches its goal."

Roku nodded. "If I use my airbending in that way, it will push the flames into the straw, spreading the fire."

Sister Disha let slip a small smile. "Precisely. Remember that airbending is all about spiral movements. You need to influence the air around the fire and the air produced by the fire, which requires an ongoing awareness of the ever-shifting currents always flowing invisibly around us.

The essence of airbending is not about thrusting your will through the world as it is in firebending—it is about sensing and responding and adapting.”

As if on cue, the wind picked up, flapping their winter robes and sending the flames licking within a hair’s breadth of a nearby bale. The breeze also made Roku shiver as it slid over his head, which Gyatso had helped him shave that morning, making Roku already regret agreeing to go bald so long as the irritating Air Nomad promised to never comment on his hair again.

“Whenever you’re ready,” the Air Nun said.

Roku rolled his neck, shook out his arms and adjusted his stance. He took a few centering breaths and raised his hands, palms open skyward like an offering.

Roku’s airbending training had been massively discouraging at first given all he’d been empowered to do in the Sacred Cave thanks to “Yungib’s” energy. But Sister Disha was patient, and he was determined to learn. Gyatso had even been providing extra training sessions since the Air Nomad’s connection to his own airbending seemed to have been fully restored.

Roku had been gradually making progress, but he wasn’t convinced he could do what this exercise required. It seemed so obvious, but he was only now realizing that he had been using his airbending exactly how Sister Disha described firebending, pushing or slinging the wind in straight, forceful blasts.

Avatar Roku acknowledged his self-doubt, recognized its source—then set it aside. His aura smoothed. He searched within himself. He took one more deep breath, focusing on the exhale, on the emptiness that creates the space to receive, perceive, and reshape the air.

“I’m ready,” he said—and began.

EPILOGUE

Sozin hadn't thought he'd return to the island so soon, but there he was, standing alongside Kozaru and Dal at the edge of the pit that used to be the Sacred Cave, where—only a year ago—he'd come to *save* Roku, only to be saved *by* Roku.

As he took in the sight of the scarred hillside, he was once again glad nobody else had been around to witness the truth of what had happened. Kozaru didn't seem to doubt Sozin's version of events—that Sozin had killed Ulo but was badly injured in the process—while Dalisay was smart enough to keep her mouth shut. And so, back in the Fire Nation, the story that spread like wild-fire was that of the Crown Prince who had defeated a powerful separatist chieftain. It read like the opening of a modern legend.

The reason Dalisay would never publicly cast doubt on his story or break her promise to keep the Avatar's presence on the island secret was because if she did, Sozin would pull the plug on her little project, the reason they'd come back all this way.

He had kept his word to Roku, though, by convincing Fire Lord Taiso to declare the island—now officially known as Lambak Island—a special region of the Fire Nation instead of a full-fledged prefecture. This allowed the clan to continue to govern them-selves—at least, ostensibly—while granting the Fire Nation the right to the island's natural resources. It was not the solution his father had wanted, but Sozin found that along with his emerging reputation came a growing confidence in the Fire Nation's future among the people given that they had such a young, promising heir. This gained the prince both the Fire Lord's respect and ear.

"This better not be a giant waste of time and gold," Sozin grumbled as they watched the workers moving the mining equipment into place.

"Trust me," Dalisay said; she continued to be extremely pleased with herself ever since she'd first come to Sozin to share her discovery. "The science is sound. But keep in mind, science can also be slow."

"I still don't get it," Kozaru said.

Dalisay let out a long-suffering sigh and tried to explain it again. “I reverse-engineered the girl’s dagger to—”

Kozaru made a face. “Reverse what?”

“She melted down the metal and separated it into its base components,” Sozin tried.

Kozaru blinked.

Dalisay proceeded anyway. “Yeah, so, I did that and discovered a mineral with several unique properties. One is that it can be used as a flux to produce steel several times stronger and lighter than what we can forge now *and* on a massive scale at a fraction of the current cost. That mineral, however, can only be found on this island, within that part of the mountain.” She gestured toward the pit. “Understand?”

“Sure,” Kozaru said. “We can make a lot of new weapons and stuff because of some special rock.”

Dalisay shrugged. “Basically.”

It was not the outcome Sozin had expected from all of this, but if it worked, the implications for the future were staggering. It made him appreciate that just as he must strengthen himself in every way possible, he must also explore all avenues for strengthening the nation.

“But remember,” Sozin said, “as far as my father knows, we’re out here mining coal and iron and harvesting exotic fruits.”

Dalisay scoffed. “Because you want all the credit.”

“No,” Sozin said sternly. “Because nobody else can know about this. Could you imagine if any of the other nations learned about this mineral and got their hands on it? Besides discovering what we have—”

“What *I* have,” Dalisay interrupted.

“Besides discovering what *we* have,” Sozin maintained, “what if they discover other uses we don’t even know about yet? I have to think the Earthbenders have a unique advantage when it comes to understanding rocks.” Given what he’d witnessed and experienced in the Sacred Cave, he was almost certain its unique properties were a result of the spirit energy that had coursed through those stones for hundreds—if not thousands—of years. So he feared what the Earthbenders might learn if they ever got their hands on it.

Sozin kept to himself the other reason he didn’t want his father to know about their discovery. Ever since he’d been allowed into the room where the

most important decisions were made, he'd grown more confident that he would make a better Fire Lord than his father. If his father knew about the mineral, he'd likely squander the advantage in some well-intentioned diplomatic exchange of information. Sozin couldn't let that happen. He was starting to form his own vision for the Fire Nation's future, and every day it became clearer that he was the only one who might bring it to fruition.

Kozaru and Dalisay exchanged a look, as if each were urging the other to tell Sozin something. But neither spoke.

"Out with it," Sozin said.

Kozaru scratched her scarred forearms. "Remember those Earthbenders from the Western Kingdom Trading Company?"

"Obviously."

"Yeah, my connections in the Earth Kingdom heard that they snuck some of that special rock out when the Air Nomads shipped them back to Omashu. And that whatever special thing they showed the queen, it kept them out of prison."

Great. Exactly what he did not want to happen from the outset.

Sozin tried to mask his annoyance as he watched the natives struggle with setting up a large drill. He had managed to plant Ta Min as a "diplomat" in Queen Guo Xun's royal court several months ago, though she hadn't informed him of anything about this yet. In fact, she hadn't reported back in weeks. He had a bad feeling about that and would have to look into it eventually.

The disappointing news also renewed his frustration with Roku. Several of the natives had wanted to execute the Earthbenders on the spot for destroying their village and killing their kin, but the Avatar had persuaded them to allow the criminals to face justice in the Earth Kingdom—as if such a thing as justice could be found anywhere in that sprawling, sloppy patchwork of poverty-stricken states they called a nation. If Roku hadn't spoken up, this wouldn't even be an issue.

His friend had undeniably—and unfortunately—changed. Sozin blamed the Air Nomads. Roku had always been easily influenced, always looking for someone to tell him what to do. Especially after Yasu's death.

Without Sozin's guidance, the Air Nomads had managed to indoctrinate Roku with their naïve, idealistic worldview. Sozin had done as promised and allowed them to build their little temple in the capital—which they

called the Fire & Air Center of Learning—but it was struggling to gain any followers and probably wouldn't exist this time next year.

So, as much as it pained him, Sozin had to wonder if he and Roku's friendship had run its course. He would always let people believe they were still as close as ever since such a connection with the Avatar could prove useful in any number of ways—but he must never let himself forget that his former friend no longer kept the Fire Nation's interests at heart. Roku was a true Fire National no more.

“What should we do about it?” Dalisay asked after a few moments when Sozin still hadn't responded to the news of the Earth Kingdom's possession of the mineral.

The sun was nearing its highest point overhead. The future quarry stretched out below, the distant workers moving about like ants. Three sleek birds took flight from a nearby tree, and Sozin watched them soar gracefully through the sky until they were shot out of the air by the hunters tasked with feeding the Crown Prince while he was on the island.

“Find out more,” Sozin said, mouth already watering in anticipation of the meal to come.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

After years of people recommending *Avatar: The Last Airbender* to me, I finally watched it at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and fell in love. That love reached a new depth when my son came into my life shortly thereafter and Korra kept us company during many middle of the night feedings. So, thank you, Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, for creating this world and entrusting me to contribute a small piece to it.

Thank you to Anne Heltzel, Jeff Whitman, Joan Hilty, and Mike DiMartino for your thoughtful feedback on the outlines and drafts. To F.C. Yee, thank you (and curse you) for setting such high standards with the Kyoshi and Yangchen novels. Thank you to everyone at Amulet Books, Paramount, and Nickelodeon who make these books possible. Thank you to everyone who has ever worked on the shows, comics, books, or games for fleshing out the Avatarverse so beautifully. Thank you to the fandom for keeping it fresh and alive with your love.

To Stacey Lee, thank you for being my beta reader and local Avatar buddy. To Glen Wallace, thank you for teaching me about mountainous ocean island geology—my bad for all the creative license I took in that regard. Thank you to my agent, Beth Phelan, for helping me develop my writing career beyond what I thought was possible.

Thank you to friends, family, and former students for your continued support. To my dog, Arwen, I appreciate the cuddles. To my son, Felix, thank you for motivating me to create something I hope you might someday enjoy (but it's cool even if you don't!). To my wife, Kathryn Ribay, thank you for every-thing—especially this time. I literally couldn't have written this book without you.

And thank you, reader, for spending some time with Sozin, Malaya, Gyatso, and Avatar Roku. It means the world to me.



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RANDY RIBAY is an award-winning writer of young adult fiction. In addition to *The Reckoning of Roku*, he is the author of *Patron Saints of Nothing*, which won the Freeman Book Award and was a finalist for the National Book Award and the L.A. Times Book Prize. He also contributed to the Printz Award–winning anthology *The Collectors*, edited by A.S. King. His other novels include *Everything We Never Had*, *After the Shot Drops*, and *An Infinite Number of Parallel Universes*. Born in the Philippines and raised in the Midwest, Randy earned his BA in English literature from the University of Colorado at Boulder and his EdM in language and literacy from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He currently lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with his wife, son, and catlike dog.

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CHRONICLES OF THE AVATAR SERIES

Soil and rock
pressed into Roku from all
sides. He was encased, crushed,
unable to move any part of his body.
His pulse raced. Was Ta Min okay? He
needed to help her. Could he enter the Avatar
state? He focused . . .

. . . He could not.

Some Avatar he was. If they ever updated *The
Lives of the Avatar*, Roku was certain his entry was
going to be no more than a couple lines. Then he remem-
bered the sonorous voice of Sister Disha: *Breathe*.

Obviously, Roku thought.

Roku focused on slowing his breathing. He wasn't con-
fident this would help him escape, but at least he wouldn't
die panicking. Maybe that was good for his reincarnation.

Roku was about to take another breath when he
felt the soil around him shift. Something pulled him
upward until he burst through the ground as if he'd
been spit up onto its surface. He fell onto all fours,
coughing and spitting out dirt. He couldn't believe
it—he actually used earthbending to save them.
Maybe he wouldn't be such a failure of an
Avatar after all.

"You're welcome," came Gyatso's
smarmy voice.

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